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OPEN HOUSE

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*First Published 1927
New Edition (Windmill Library) March 1929
New Impression July 1930
July 1932*

*Printed in Great Britain at
The Windmill Press, Kingswood, Surrey*

TO
ROBERT AND SYLVIA LYND

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HOME FROM THE SEA

TO RETURN from a long voyage is almost to be born again. There is one brief moment, after landing, when you discover your old life as Columbus discovered America, when you play stout Cortez not on a peak in Darien but on a bleak English quayside. It seems to you, if only for a second or so, that not one of the places you have seen—lands coloured like the rainbow, ports with names that are themselves three-volume romances—is so fantastic as the grey little island to which you have returned. Then familiarity comes crashing down and everything round you is clear and solid and something known to you all your days, whereas all your voyaging has crumbled into the fragments of a dream. Because I had made a good many voyages, lasting from a few hours to a week, I thought I knew something of the sea ; but actually I knew nothing. Those short voyages do not allow you sufficient time in which to forget your old existence as a land animal or to see the life afloat as anything but a brief episode, a queer interlude of rocking decks and berths and alleyways and white paint. Now that I have spent week after week in this strange world, when ten thousand miles have foamed past, when two score suns have risen from the encircling waters and plunged down into them again, I understand many things that were before a mystery.

Thus it was not long before I began to see the

world as long-voyage sailors must always have seen it. In spite of the blue expanses on the map, I had always thought of the sea as a kind of happy accident, a bright novelty that made its appearance here and there so that landsmen might enjoy their holidays. Now I saw that the maps had told even less than the truth, that the world was indeed a waste of tumbling waters in which it was the land that was the happy accident. By observing narrowly the sun and stars, poring over charts and cunningly turning a wheel, you might, with luck, arrive where some solid stuff peeped out of the water and grew trees and grass and even streets and houses. We flatter ourselves, we men and apes and beetles, that the world belongs to us; but in truth it belongs to the fishes, who can go round and round the globe with never a break in the rhythmical play of their fins and tails. We are mere interlopers. Look in at the nearest fishmonger's and you will observe in the round eyes of the dead creatures there a look of pained surprise, of wounded dignity. Now, I can understand that look, for the fish, well aware of the fact that the world was made for him and his kind, suddenly finds himself the prey of an insolent upstart with feet and lungs, who has only a fraction of the earth's surface on which to live. An alderman kidnapped by a turtle could not be more surprised or feel more wounded in his dignity.

It is true that the ship itself was in a sense nothing but a floating bit of land, on which we could lead a life not surprisingly different from our customary one. But there were differences. The background,

the vague ring of sea and sky, was all strange, so that even the ordinary things we did took on a new significance. Some people never notice this difference, and that is why they find sea voyages so tedious. Let us admit at once that long voyages, even to places with names like rich sonnets, are not the exciting affairs that the romantic fancy paints them as being. Compelled to pass the time somehow between one meal and the next (and how important meals are on board!—the four stout pillars of the day), you find yourself doing things that would be beneath your notice ashore: reading books that you have despised for years, playing crudely devised games with almost unsporting eagerness, encouraging your companions to tell their longest and dullest stories, indulging in naps without stint or shame. The days can be so empty of incident that the sight of a rusty old buoy that has drifted out into mid-ocean, a few floating spars, the mere idle rumour of a distant ship, will send every one crowding to the rails. No one can complain here of the hurrying hours, the day gone by like a flash, for time stretches out as empty and vacant as the shining space surrounding us. There is time for everything, even to work through all the games of Patience or to read the story of Clarissa Harlowe.

If you have no sense of the changed background, of having been born again into a strange little world, then this life may seem tedious enough; but most of us found it had a curious, fascinating quality of its own. Our old life faded like a dream. Our old interests, the familiar routine, were lost with the

horizons of home. We were in a new world, and became, as it were, new people, strange even to ourselves. Our days may have seemed empty enough, passed in trivialities, entirely lacking that excitement with which our fancy had dowered them; and yet they came to have a significance and charm of their own, a kind of rhythmical flow, beating to the throb of the ship's engines, that we were sorry to find broken, in spite of all the bustle and interest of an arrival in port, when we came to the land again. Even those who complained most of the tedium of sea voyages found themselves, rather to their astonishment, half regretting that they were leaving us at this port or the other, that the queer interlude was at an end. There was, at least to me, a curious sweet melancholy that pervaded this easy empty life of ours and gave it a fascination, an in-describable charm. The background against which we performed our little antics seemed nearer to eternity than the familiar one of our ordinary life. The crowded, cosy, painted world we knew had faded into the silent universe of bright stars and black space. Night after night, when they danced on the boat deck, I would watch them with a kind of sweet trouble about my heart, a strange lovely melancholy like that of a boy in love through one long dreaming summer. The quaint tunes on the gramophone—those wistful dance tunes of our time that would be so bright and carefree if they only could—blown into a whisper by the tropical breeze; the little circle of coloured electric globes, the bare arms of the girls, the black coats and white coats of

their partners, against the huge staring night, the stars and the restless shadow of the sea: all this held me night after night, for in this tiny patch of sound and light—something so little and lovely, foolish and yet half tragic—there seemed to be all our human life. Nor was it any different when we held carnival and capered there as pierrots and shepherdesses and cowboys and gipsy maidens, for, once we had surged from below up into the night, these our revels shrank to a pin-point of light, a whisper in the darkness.

Now that I have set foot on shore again, it is as if I had never been away, had only dozed for a minute or two in my chair and been visited by a confused dream of a long journey. The seas and flaming sunsets and islands and tropical jungles have been packed away like the tattered scenery of some bankrupt theatrical company. That life on the ship which had blotted out all other existence is now nothing but a few coloured scraps in the memory, shredding away with every tick of my watch. Those people who made up my whole world only a little while ago, what are they now but ghosts? Where is the general with the extraordinary eyebrows (they were far larger than any subaltern's moustache); and pretty Miss N., whose fancy dress was so daring, who won so many prizes and stayed out so late, it was said, on the boat deck; and the baronet who had been a cow-puncher and grumbled because there were no hard biscuits and salt junk on the menu; and the parson's wife, whose voice was too shrill and who danced far too many times with the sleek

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cavalry captain? Where are the three planters who never left one corner of the smoking-room; and the spectacled American who was so angry when his favourite game of shuffle-board was not included in the ship's sports; and the three dark-eyed girls from Demerara who had just seen snow for the first time in England and could talk of nothing else; and the "bookie" from Yorkshire who was always getting up complicated decimal sweeps on the day's run; and fat Mr. S. from Baltimore, who ate so much and so quickly that he seemed to be warehousing rather than eating his food; and the mysterious grim man who was going up the Orinoco; and the very old gentleman who sat opposite to me at table and would always pinch all the rolls (as if they were little boys' cheeks) at breakfast-time? Where are they, these ghosts, dimming now while the cock crows in my memory? And where is the ship that once carried them and me and was once all our world? Already it is as remote and insubstantial as the Flying Dutchman.

IN CRIMSON SILK

You will probably declare roundly that I ought not to have bought them in the first place. But I regret nothing. I realize, even better than you do, that there was, of course, no sense in the affair. Whoever crimson silk pyjamas are intended for, they are certainly not intended for me. I am not the kind of man who robes himself sumptuously in the night watches, and for years now I have crept to my bed or down to the bathroom in the demurest shades, the most self-effacing of pale blue stripes. My friends, men of a not always happy candour, have told me more than once that I look as if I sleep in my clothes, and I have no doubt that I look even dingier at night than I do during the day. Probably if they saw me in my pyjamas they would say that I looked as if I had spent all day in them. But not only were these gorgeous red things obviously not the kind of pyjamas I usually wear, they were also quite superfluous because I had no need of another pair. An extra suit of pyjamas, of course, will always—as people say—“come in”, but you could hardly imagine these opulent, regal garments merely coming in, wistfully awaiting their turn at the bottom of a drawer. Emphatically their purchase cannot be justified by common sense, but considered, as it should be considered, as a romantic gesture, a wave of defiance to the greyness and dullness of things, it was, I think, by no means contemptible.

It was a grey day, had been indec¹ a grey week; nothing outside the day's routine had happened for some time; and it did not look as if anything would ever happen again. My body had gone on dressing and undressing itself, eating, drinking, smoking, pushing itself into buses and trains, floundering heavily into large chairs, had gone, in short, through all its little repertoire of tricks; but the rest of me, mind, spirit or soul, appeared to be on the point of hibernating. There I was then, going about my business drearily this grey morning, when suddenly in passing a shop window I caught sight of a pair of crimson silk pyjamas, or rather of flame and treasure and lost sunsets, the gorgeous East in fee. They were not things meekly soliciting in a shop window, but an event, a challenge, a blast of sartorial trumpets. The sun and the wind, the stars in their courses, had conspired together to produce a world of dirty monochrome, in which nothing could possibly happen, and we had all weakly bowed to their decision with one grand exception, the gentlemen's outfitters, who realizing that their moment had arrived made a gesture of defiance and evolved these pyjamas, to burn there, ruby-red. I knew at once that my own moment had also arrived. There are occasions in a man's existence when he must make something happen, must fling a splash of colour into his life, or some part of him, perhaps the boy in him, will perish, flying broken before the grey armies of age, timidity or boredom.

These are brave words, but candour compels me to add that if the shopman had even flicked a derisive

eyelid when I inquired about those pyjamas, they would never have been mine. I am prepared to stand facing the dark tide of circumstance, making romantic gestures of defiance, but I am not prepared to stand before a counter looking a fool. However, I never saw the faintest tremor. His manner instantly set me at ease, for he produced the pyjamas with that air of grave approval, as if to say, "It is not for me to comment on your admirable taste, sir, but it is evident that you and I think alike on these matters", that air which is the secret of all old and expensive shops. He spread the crimson bravery on the counter, lovingly fingered the material, pointed out this and that, and then mentioned the price, a figure by no means unworthy of that regal magnificence, mentioned it as a mere after-thought, a curious little fact that might possibly interest me. I said I would take them along myself, and watched him fold them away into a neat paper package. For the remainder of that morning I might have been seen as a dullish solid-looking citizen clutching a small and apparently uninteresting parcel. In reality I was a kind of wild poet who had just had one adventure and would have another at the day's end, who carried with him through all the city's grey tides some night robes as vivid as a sunset, spoil of Tyre and Sidon.

My other adventure was, of course, putting them on that night. That was three days ago, but even now there is still some faint thrill in going to bed or waking in the morning, for naturally I have been enjoying my appearance in an entirely new part. Clad in crimson silk, I feel a very different person,

my thoughts adapting themselves to my outward magnificence. As I survey my lustrous blood-red length at night, as I wake in the morning to see two arms that might have come from a pagoda in festival stretching before me, another personality is superimposed upon the one I know so well. I feel a wicked luxurious fellow, with Nubian slaves, a torture chamber, and a huddle of shrinking Circassian beauties, round the corner. If I had to speak, I should do it in King Cambyses's vein. I am hand in glove with the Borgias. I enjoy the thought that the poor and honest are suffering, and am all for whipping the dogs. Strong, ruthless, beautiful, I stand high above common morality and look down with a cruel smile upon the whimpering herd. Men are my counters, women my playthings, and I own no god but myself. And then, having doffed or forgotten the pyjamas, I turn back again, dwindle if you will, into the rather timid, respectable and not unkindly citizen known to my family and friends.

The least thing, it would seem, will ring up the curtain on these mental histrionics. I have only to be given one of those enormous and very expensive cigars by means of which companies are merged and dividends declared, and immediately I find myself turning into a different person. The mouth through which this costly smoke slowly dribbles seems to expand and turn grim. I feel rich, powerful, rather cynical and sensual, one who looks with narrowed eyes at the poor virtuous fools of this world. But put me, in my shabby clothes, in the middle of a richly dressed and bejewelled company, and in a

moment I am your stern moralist, your sturdy philosopher, piercing with one glance the hollow shams of life. While they are lighting their cigars (brigands and zanies all of them), I am smoking the honest pipe of Thomas Carlyle and telling them under my breath that it shall not avail them. Yet I have only to have a Turkish cigarette and a suspicion that the lady beside me (who probably mistakes me for someone else) thinks I am a witty dog, a clever trifler, and there I am, airy, exquisite, now slightly wistful, now mocking, epigrammatizing the world away. But let a genuine fellow of this breed, with a more rapid and heartless flow of epigrams and more superbly creased trousers (for you must have well-creased trousers for this part, and that is one reason why I, who bag dreadfully, can rarely play it), let one of these fellows join us and within a minute or so I have changed again, being now simpler, deeper, more kindly, none of your mere witty triflers but a man with a heart and a brain and a purpose, whose lightest word is worth more than a bushel of epigrams and cheap wit. Thus can cigar, pipe or cigarette play Puck with my personality, wandering dazed in its midsummer wood. Small wonder that a suit of crimson silk should be so potent.

When I consider these and similar drolleries of the mind, for ever ransacking its wardrobes and lumber rooms and dressing up for charades, I wonder more and more at the loud intolerant persons we know so well, who have doubted nothing for years, so supremely confident of knowing all truth and virtue that they are ready, nay, eager to show their

fellow creatures the rope and gallows for a word or a gesture. Are they of different stuff from me, made all of a piece? Do they never find their personalities, or at least some part of them, veering with the wind of circumstance? Does nothing ever change their point of view, at least in the secret conclaves of the mind? Have they never discovered any touch of the theatre and the masquerade in the day's grave fooling? If so—and we can never know—then there is some excuse for their amazing confidence in their infallibility, their refusal to be tolerant of any difference in minds. But is it that they are not more but less stable than most of us are, that they are not acting half-a-hundred different parts for a few odd minutes and taking pleasure in the absurd transformations, but are solemnly play-acting all the time, desperately keeping the outward appearance of one consistent character? Perhaps, unknown to us, they are wearing their crimson silk day and night.

THE BERKSHIRE BEASTS

I FOUND myself walking through a large park with an old family friend, let us call her Miss Tweedletop, a somewhat characterless, colourless lady whom I had not even seen for years. Such persons have a habit of popping up in dreams years after we have apparently ceased to give them even a passing thought. They travel, by what devious ways we cannot imagine, into our subconscious minds, look around them bravely and then, shaking the mud off their shoes and taking a deep breath, they somehow contrive to jump up into our dreams. Miss Tweedletop and I, then, were walking through this park, and I knew somehow that we were really one unit of a fairly large party of friends who had all come out for a day's pleasure and sightseeing. How I knew this I do not know, because the dream seemed to begin at the point when we had either lagged behind or outdistanced the main body, which I never saw at all. All my dreams appear to be tiny instalments of an enormous *feuilleton*: I never know the beginning or the end, although I am one of the chief actors, and also, they tell me, the dramatist, producer, and scene-shifter. But I always know a little of what has gone before; I give myself, as it were, a hint of the situation before I set myself on the stage; and on this occasion I knew that we were both members of a sightseeing party.

We were strolling down a sort of carriage drive

that swept forward, as such things usually do if there is space for it, in a vast curve. The place was not unlike Richmond Park but rather more trim and well-ordered, perhaps the private park of some duke or other. We had walked slowly forward for some time, slowly because Miss Tweedletop is (or was) an elderly woman; and had been idly talking of this and that, when suddenly I saw, only a little way in front, a most curious group, a herd of the most unlikely creatures. They were of various sizes, but the largest would be easily twice the size of a full-grown elephant. They were not unlike elephants in appearance, except that they tapered more noticeably from head (their heads were enormous) to tail, and though they had the same huge flopping ears, they had no trunks. I am no lion tamer and I confess to being nervous in the presence of all strange animals, but I think that even a lion tamer or an elephant hunter might have felt rather diffident about approaching such creatures, who looked as if they had strayed out of the early chapters of the *Outline of History*. Miss Tweedletop, however, walked on even after she had noticed the astonishing brutes we were gradually approaching.

"Ah", she exclaimed, but rather slowly, like one who makes small-talk, "there are the Berkshire Beasts". She said it quite casually, just as people say "There is the County Court" or "There is the Albert Memorial" when they are not excited about the matter themselves nor expect you to be excited about it, but are simply making talk. I could see that Miss Tweedletop thought I knew as much about

the Berkshire Beasts as she and every one else did. By this time they were much closer, and I could see that they were a dark green colour and rather wrinkly and shiny, not unlike something between a cheap kind of lady's handbag and one of those foul and unnatural editions of the poets that are bought only as presents; but many thousands of times bigger than the most capacious handbag or the largest edition of Tennyson ever known. They looked bigger than ever. And then I noticed that every one of them, male or female, old or young, was wearing spectacles. Yes, spectacles, rimless spectacles of the kind affected by very intelligent, well-informed persons. They were, of course, much larger than our spectacles; indeed, I noticed that each lens of the spectacles worn by the adult monsters was about the size of an ordinary dinner plate. As the creatures turned their heads, their glasses gleamed and flashed in the sun. I did not see anything very droll in all this; I remember that I thought it a little odd at the time, but nothing more; indeed, unless I am mistaken, it appeared to me that the creatures, peering through or over their glasses at us, looked more sinister than ever.

All this I noticed, of course, during the brief interval of time when Miss Tweedletop made her remark. And then, instead of owning that I knew nothing about the Berkshire Beasts and thus giving myself the opportunity of learning something worth knowing in the natural history of dreamland, like a fool, and a cowardly fool, I allowed a bad social habit to overmaster me, and replied, equally casually,

"Ah, yes. The Berkshire Beasts". I might have been their keeper for years; I might have spent half my lifetime tracking them down and capturing them in their native haunts (and what haunts they must have had!); I might have been the crazy oculist who had fitted them with their spectacles; so casually did I reply. But meanwhile, I had come to the conclusion that it was high time we turned back. One or two of them were moving in a leisurely but awe-inspiring fashion in our direction, and we were still walking towards them, as if they had been mere cattle or sheep and not monstrosities twenty feet high. True their spectacles suggested that they were not ordinary monsters, that they knew something of the decencies and courtesies of life, and even hinted, as glasses always do, at a bookish pacifism, a ferocity strictly confined to polemics and debate. Why we should generally associate short sight with good nature is rather a mystery, but we do, and there is always something peculiarly revolting and unnatural about a spectacled murderer, just as there would be about a baby who was caught trying to poison its nurse.

One monster detached itself from the others, perhaps it was the leader as it was certainly one of the largest, and moved gigantically to meet us and then stood, with lowered head, looking at us over the top of its glasses, not ten yards away. I can see it yet, with its incredible head, dark green wrinkled skin, its spectacles stretched across a broad flat nose that was at least eighteen inches from side to side. Now or never was the time to turn round and run

for it, even though there was no cover, no hiding place, for quite a distance. But the protest died in my throat, for Miss Tweedletop never turned a hair but strolled on with no more concern than she would have had in passing a tobacconist's shop. She did not even seem particularly interested in the creatures; and of course if she knew them and was not afraid, there was no reason for me to fear. But I do not think it was any such piece of reasoning that led me to walk forward by her side without any protest; it was merely the fear of being laughed at by a little old maiden lady. I saw myself being squashed as a boy squashes a black beetle; in a moment or so, those astonishing spectacles would be splashed and reddened by my blood.

But nothing happened. We passed almost under the leading monster's nose and he did nothing but survey us a little sadly and sceptically. It was incredible; the rimless spectacles had won. Perhaps that is why the creatures were made to wear them; before, when they were merely ordinary monsters without glasses, they were probably the most ferocious and dangerous creatures in the world, but now, simply with the addition of these contrivances of glass and wire, they were more gentle than most of our fellow humans. Probably the females were learning to knit monstrously, and the males were cultivating philosophical interests and debated among themselves as to the Knower and the Known. But as to that, I shall never be sure. Something, however, I did learn, for Miss Tweedletop made two more remarks before she tripped back into the lumber

room of my uncared-for memories. "You know", she said, as casually as ever, "they're only kept now for their singing".

If she was as casual, I was as foolish as before, for instead of boldly pressing for an explanation after admitting my ignorance, I still concealed it and remarked: "Really? Only for their singing?" No doubt I thought that, later, perhaps when we had joined the others, by putting a question here and there I could learn all I wanted without confessing my ignorance. If so, I was sadly disappointed, and was rightly served for my foolishness. Miss Tweedle-top seemed faintly indignant, as if the tone of my reply cast a shade of doubt upon the ability of the beasts. "Yes", she said, rather reproachfully, "but they sing so beautifully". And then not a word more, for suddenly she and the monsters and the park and the bright summer day were all huddled away into the playbox of the night and I found my nose sniffing at the cold morning, and myself further from that park than I am from Sirius. Somewhere in the limbo of dreams, there is a park in which, perhaps, the Berkshire Beasts, like the morning stars, are singing together, singing so beautifully.

DISSOLUTION IN HAYMARKET

SURELY there is hardly a street in London less morbid, more determined in its own sedate fashion to make something out of life, than Haymarket. Indeed, now I come to think of it, Haymarket is one of my favourite thoroughfares. It has a pleasant gentlemanly air, with just a suggestion of the eighteenth century, and has, too, all manner of interesting things in it. To begin with, there are its two large theatres, one of which is associated in my mind with a number of charming plays, and the other—I regret to say—only with camels. There are the Stores and a fine old tobacco shop, and, best of all, the shipping agents with their model steamers and little panoramas. Those steamers alone—and there are quite a number of them—lift the whole street high above the common level. The sight of them prevents London from closing in on you, for it suddenly opens some little windows in what seems the grey wall of the street, and through these windows come flashing the bright dunes and red roofs of Denmark or the shining peaks of the Sierra Nevada. If this is not enough, flanking them you have the actual windows of the little panoramas, which artfully combine in themselves the lure of travel and the excitement of a toy theatre. No, it would be hard to find a London street less morbid, less gloomy, more likely to augment rather than diminish one's zest for life.

Yet as I was journeying on a bus down Haymarket the other day, about the lunch hour, there suddenly came crashing down upon me a mood such as I have never known before. It was as if a huge black stone had been flung into the pool of my consciousness. It all happened (as we were told it would) in the twinkling of an eye. Everything was changed. The whole cheerful pageant of the street immediately crumpled and collapsed, with all its wavering pattern of light and shade, its heartening sights and sounds, its warm humanity, its suggestion of permanence, and I was left shivering in the middle of a tragedy. Not something magnificent, you understand, with funereal guns roaring out over the battlements of Elsinore or queens with bright hair dying for love, nothing after the high Roman fashion; but a dreary tragedy of cheated fools and illusions blown to the winds, of withering and decay, dust and worms. I saw this world for a moment or so through the hollow eyes of the prophets and the great pessimists, and what I saw left me shivering with cold and sick at heart. Nor did there remain with me that cosy painted chamber of the mind into which I might retire, there to forget in comfort, for it, too, was desolated, heaped about with cold ashes and with its tattered curtains flapping in the wind. All the stir and noise and glitter seemed nothing but fast-shredding pigment on a dead face.

I might have been old Donne himself, brooding over corruption and putrefaction and the gnawing worm; and it was his words that returned to me: ". . . all our life is but a going out to the place of

execution, to death". What was the bus I was in but a greasy tumril, and what were all of us, jogging there empty-eyed, littered with our foolish paraphernalia of newspapers, umbrellas, parcels, but a company of the doomed? There we were, so many grinning skeletons masquerading in this brief and bitter carnival as fat citizens, charwomen, bus conductors, chorus girls; idly juggling with thoughts of our destinations, the offices, restaurants, clubs, theatres that claimed us; when, in truth, we had all but one sure destination—perhaps round the next corner—the narrow grave. "The sun is setting to thee, and that for ever." And on the face of every one there, hurrying with me to the place of execution, I read the marks of weakness and decay, and seemed to see that untiring hand at work furrowing the brow and dimming the eyes. Everywhere was dissolution. The whole street was mouldering and rotting, hastening with all that was in it to its inevitable end. The crowds I saw through the windows seemed made up of creatures that were either gross or wasted, shuffling, bent, twisted in limb, already bleached and mangled by disease; and here and there among the crowd, in bright contrast and yet infinitely more pitiful, were the few who had youth and strength and beauty, who moved as if they thought they could live for ever—who had not yet heard, from afar, the hammering, the slow tread, the patterning of earth upon the coffin.

There was something more than the old thought, death is certain, festering in the heart of that mood. That, indeed, is a thought we are always quite

willing to salute, with a mere wave of the hand, but are really very unready to entertain, except when we make its first acquaintance in childhood, when it has a trick of bringing a whole host of grimacing shadows about our bedsides. But there was something more behind that sudden tragic vision I had. There was a sense of universal dissolution, of this life as a pitiful piece of cheating, of bright promise all ruthlessly scattered. Nothing remained but the certainty of decay and death. The more you loved life, delighting in whatever it had of beauty and goodness to offer you, the more openly you bared your breast for the stroke of its dagger. I saw all of us there—my fellow passengers in the bus, the driver and the conductor, the policeman and the hawkers, the playgoers waiting at the pit door, the crowds shopping or loafing—as the victims of this great treachery, lured into worshipping a loveliness that must fade and pass, trapped into setting our hearts upon things we can never keep with us, upon beings who smile for an hour and then miserably perish. It is well, I thought, for the grandest of our old preachers to say: “We long for perishing meat, and fill our stomachs with corruption; we look after white and red, and the weaker beauties of the night; we are passionate after rings and seals, and enraged at the breaking of a crystal”, and then to make it plain that these things will not avail us. But other and nobler things, it seemed to me, would avail us even less, for the more we opened our hearts, making ourselves eager and loving, the more certain amid this universal dissolution was our ultimate misery.

We are the poor playthings of Time, dandled for an hour and then flung to rot in a corner; and yet we are all born, as was said of Coleridge, hungering for Eternity.

So brimmed with such thoughts, feelings, old quotations, strange images, clustering together like the pieces in a kaleidoscope to form one tragic vision of things, I was carried down the desolated length of Haymarket, where man spendeth his vain life as a shadow. As those last words will suggest, my mood had by that time crystallized into the utter hopelessness of that other and greater Preacher. Vanity of vanities! Had I been a natural man instead of the smooth mountebank demanded by decency and encouraged by my natural timidity, I should have descended from the bus, put ashes on my head, and cried "Woe!" to the assembled hawkers and playgoers and policemen, stunning them with gigantic metaphors. That is what, in my heart, I wanted to do, so surely was I possessed by this sudden hopeless vision and by a mixed feeling of contempt and pity for my fellow mortals. Yet I sat there, quietly enough, and still well aware of the fact that I was on my way to lunch with two friends at a club not very far away. I was, as it were, purely automatically aware of this fact, for in those last moments, so rapt had I been in my vision, I had had no sense even of personal identity. But I moved forward, as a man might over a darkening field of battle, towards the club and my friends, and arrived there and greeted them in a kind of dream; and then, suddenly, out of my dream, I looked at them sharply

and curiously, these friends of mine, whose grim sentence and that of all they held dear still seemed to be ringing in my ears. How strangely childish, touchingly naïve, their smiling confidence, their little preoccupations, their chatter. I saw them seating themselves opposite me at the lunch table, and it was as if they were people acting on a distant stage; yet I did not feel completely detached from them, but, on the contrary, felt a kind of tenderness for them and all their little toys and antics. Then I heard one of these doomed creatures propose that we should drink Burgundy. I stood out for something lighter, for though I like a glass of Burgundy as well as the next man, I maintain it is far too heavy for lunch.

THE TOY FARM

ANGELA, at the house where I am staying, has just celebrated a birthday, her seventh, and is now the breathless mistress of a toy farm. You never saw such a farm. It has barns, haystacks, sties, hurdles, gates, trees (which must be looked at only from the front), and a yellow tumbril with scarlet wheels. There are fat brown horses, cows that stand up and cows that sit down, black pigs and pink pigs, sheep with their lambs, a goat, two dogs (one staring fiercely out of a kennel), and a coloured host of turkeys, ducks, hens and chicks. There are even people on this farm, five of them, and very fine people they are too. A man in his shirt-sleeves perpetually pushes a crimson wheelbarrow; and two carters, wearing white smocks, brown gaiters, red scarves, and little round hats, for ever stride forward, whips in hand, whistling tunes that we shall never catch. Then there is the farmer himself, bluff, whiskered, in all his bravery of scarlet waistcoat, white cravat, and green breeches, who grasps his stout stick and stares at things from under his hard brown hat. His wife, neat and buxom in a blue bonnet, a pink gown, and snowy apron, with a basket in one hand and a large green umbrella in the other, is setting out upon some never-to-be-accomplished errand. All these people, labourers, master, mistress, though not more than two inches high and only made of painted tin, stand there for ever confident, ruddy,

smiling in perpetual sunshine: they seem to stare at us out of a lost Arcadia.

Perhaps that is why poor Angela has not so far had that farm to herself, being compelled to share it with a number of shameless adults. It is, of course, an engaging toy, and there is not one of us here, I am thankful to say, so old and wicked, so desiccated, as to have lost all delight in toys, particularly those that present something huge and elaborate, such as a fort crammed with soldiers, a battleship, a railway station, a farm, on a tiny scale and in brighter hues than Nature ever knew. These toys transform you at a stroke into a god, and a happier god than any who look down upon our sad muddle. It is, of course, the more poetical of our activities that are chosen as subjects for these bright miniatures of the nursery, yet there is so much poetry in the toys themselves that even if they mirrored in little even the most prosaic things, they would still be satisfying. I remember that when I was a child, the boy next door was given a tiny printing machine, a gasping, wheezing affair that would print nothing but the blurred image of three ducks. He and I, however, collecting all the paper we could lay our hands on, would spend hours, hours full to the brim, printing ducks, thousands and thousands of ducks, and while we were engaged in producing this monotonous sequence of dim fowls we asked nothing more from life beyond the promise of suety meals at odd intervals.

Yet so far, nobody, not even in America, I imagine, has produced a toy miniature of business

life, the Limited Company complete in box from ten shillings upwards. What Angela and her like would think of such a toy I do not know, though their sense of wonder is sufficiently strong for them to find entertainment in anything; but I do know that I should be tempted to buy one this very morning. You would have a building, with the front wall removed as it is in the best dolls'-houses, so that you could arrange the people and the furniture just as you pleased. There would be tiny stenographers and clerks and cashiers; typewriters, calculating machines, ledgers and files no bigger than your finger-nail; telephones that you could just see and never hear; and all manner of things, chairs and tables and desks, to be shifted from one room to another, from the Counting House to the Foreign Department, and so forth. There would be a Board Room with four or five directors, fat little chaps in shiny black, with the neatest, tiniest spats imaginable, all sitting round a table some six inches long. In the best sets you would be given a Chairman, quarter of an inch taller than the others and costing perhaps a penny more, who might be so contrived that he stood perpetually at the head of the table addressing his fellow directors. If I had him I should call him Sir Glossy Tinman. Then, if you wanted to do the thing properly, you would be able to buy Debenture Holders at two shillings or half-a-crown the dozen, complete with an interrupter who was rising to his feet and holding up an arm, the very image, in tin and varnish, of a retired Colonel of the Indian Army. Nor would you stop

there; the possibilities are almost endless; and I promise to outline some of them to any enterprising manufacturer of toys who should consider putting the complete Limited Company on the market.

It may be, though, that there are special reasons why we should all be finding the toy farm so enchanting. Its little people, as I have said, seem to stare at us out of a lost Arcadia. Behind them, and their bright paraphernalia of beasts and belongings, is the Idea, dominating the imagination. This farmer and his wife are the happy epitome of all farmers and their wives, but they are unmistakably idealized. These white-smocked carters, for ever soundlessly whistling among the clover, are not the countrymen we know in miniature, but are images from an old dream of the countryside. Looking at these trees, or at least looking at them from the front, we might cry with Keats:

Ah, happy, happy bough! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu.

Here is the bright epitome, not of the country we can find where the tram-lines come to an end and the street lamps fade out, but of the country that has always existed in our imagination, so clean, trim, lavishly coloured. None of us here, I venture to say, has any passion for agriculture as a pursuit, for real farms, with their actual lumbering beasts, their mud and manure, their clumsy and endless obstetrics, their mortgages and loans and market prices, their long days of wet fields and dirty straw. We may regard the farmer as an excellent solid fellow or as a grasping ruffian, but certainly he

never seems to us a poetical figure whose existence is passed in a golden atmosphere. Yet there is such a farmer somewhere at the back of our minds, a farmer in a picture-book, and this piece of painted, moulded tin is his portrait. If we could only find him in this actual life, not all the pleasures of the town would keep us from living in his shadow all the rest of our days, for we know that his world is one long dreamed of, that countryside where there are no ugly downpours, no sodden fields and lanes choked with mud, where only the gentlest shower of rain breaks through the sunshine, where everything is as clean as a new pin and fresh from the paint-box, where men and women are innocent and gay and the very beasts are old friends, where sin and suffering and death are not even a distant rumour. Is not this the Arcadia that men lost long ago and have never found again?

How long this dream has lasted no man can say. It shines through all literature, from the poets and novelists of yesterday to Virgil and Theocritus. It is the burden of more than one half of our old songs, with all their "Hawthorne buds, and swete Eglantine, and girlonds of roses, and Sopps in wine", their Corydons and neat-handed Phyllises, their haymakers, rakers, reapers, and mowers waiting on their Summer Queen, their hey-down-derry of shepherd lovers in the shade. And always this lovely time

When Tom came home from labour,
Or Cis to milking rose,
Then merrily went their tabor,
And nimbly went their toes

had just passed away. Nobody ever saw this countryside, but it was always somewhere round the corner; a turn at the end of a long road, a descent from some strange hill, and there it might be, shining in the sun. It is not the perfervid vision of townsmen, longing for the fields in their wilderness of bricks and mortar, a revolt against the ugly mechanical things of to-day, but a dream that would appear to be as old as civilized man himself, touching men's imagination when towns were little more than specks in the green countryside. Poets who lived in the country, who passed all their days among real shepherds and dairymaids, could sing of this other country where there was nothing ugly nor any pain and sorrow, knowing full well that this was not the land that stretched itself beyond their gates but a land they had never seen. It is one of the more homely manifestations of that ideal of unchanging beauty which haunts the mind of man everywhere and in every age, and from which there is no escape except into brutishness. Its shadow can fall even upon a number of little pieces of painted tin newly come from the toy-shop.

DOUBTING IT

EVEN now, late in the day as it is, I know that it would pay. If only I could make up my mind about everything once and for all, strike a mental attitude and never relax from it, set up my own little universe and never catch even a glimpse of any other, I should be more at ease, more confident as a man and more successful as a scribbler. Instead of prattling on week after week, trusting that a bright patch of words here and there will excuse the poor threadbare coat, I should be putting every one in his place, be assured, witty, profound, and all—and here's the rub—at less cost than if I were still jangling my two or three melancholy bells. You have all your opinions there, pigeon-holed, ready to hand, and so all you have to do is to get hold of some poor body's opinion, compare it with your own, point out to yourself and your readers where it differs—that is, how far it departs from the truth—touch off a couple of epigrams, and your witty and yet profound little essay is done. The more confident you are, the less you are troubled with any kind of doubt, the easier it is to be brilliant. With your pigeon-holes ranged at your back, all your opinions in their usual places, you can face the world gaily. Up pops a question; your hand dives in for the answer, which is where you last left it, and hurls it out, and all the onlookers give a cheer. Your first effort, making your mind up about everything and then having done

with it, is almost your last, for all the rest is mere Aunt Sally play. If young writers would only spend about six months, or even only three if they are in a hurry, deciding what they think about everything, ranging their opinions, dried and pressed, in neat rows, putting them where they know they can find them, and then would make up their minds once for all that they are right and can never be proved wrong, that no shadow of doubt need ever fall across their path, then they would not only save themselves endless trouble in the future, but would also find that they had taken a short cut to fame.

This is not a recent discovery of mine, even though, from its worn, familiar look, it should have every appearance of one of my new discoveries. I have known it for a long time. If only I could put together, from even the oddest materials, some kind of neat, waterproof little universe of my own, which I could push into people's faces on every occasion when I wrote or spoke, I should become a person of some importance. People would remark: "You know, that fellow's got something to say". Only the other night an American, who was either unusually callous or under the impression that I was a thoughtful dry-goods merchant, said to me: "I can't read your belles-lettres writers. They don't seem to me to have anything to say". And, of course, he was right about some of us. I know only too well that I have nothing to say. I may assume, for trade purposes, a dogmatic manner now and then, but actually I have fewer hard-and-fast opinions than the ordinary stockbroker or tea planter, and do not.

know my own mind as well as they do. Heaven knows that I have tried, yes, for years, to settle everything, religion, philosophy, politics, economics, and what not, and have done with it; so that I could be ready for any emergency, and instruct everybody, and say the same thing over and over again but more brightly each time; until at last people recognized me as the leader of one school of thought, and the university extension lecturers, and after them the literary historians, gave my attitude a label and, out of their love of labels, devoted much time and space to my message and influence.

But no, try as I may, I cannot strike an attitude and keep to it rigidly; I cannot arrange my opinions and then pigeon-hole them. I forget what my attitude is and then either strike another one or do without, just go mentally lounging about, as it were, settling nothing for anybody. My opinions, instead of being there, neat and handy, ready for me at any hour of day or night, are never the same size and shape for two weeks together; some swell terrifically, others flow into one another, and others again dwindle and dwindle until they finally disappear. Then there are some subjects, very important ones, too, in which I simply cannot arrive at any conclusions, for every different attitude, every different opinion I meet seems equally right—and then equally wrong. It is not, you will understand, that I am indifferent and ignorant, content to let others search for Truth. I have read all the books, stacks and stacks of them; I have thought and thought; I have argued in all manner of places with all manner

of people. But it has always been the same, for just when I think I have settled everything, once for all, and see exactly where we all stand, doubts of every kind come creeping in, eating through walls and ceilings and floors, and very soon my fine structure, in which I had meant to pass the rest of my intellectual life, is a tattered little ruin in the mist. Instead of doing the honours, seated at the head of a long and gorgeously appointed table, there I am, grubbing in the rubbish heap for a dismal little ironic jest or two, a possible fine phrase.

When I am casting about for a scapegoat, I sometimes wonder whether I ought not to blame my elders, the admired writers of my youth. If they had been a little less cocksure, might not I have achieved a little more certainty? It is true that their unfailing confidence, their freedom from any kind of doubt whatever, showed me at what to aim, the road to travel; but I cannot help thinking that it was they who prevented me from arriving anywhere. They were all so sure. When I think of the writers who were all-important, to me and most other people, during the decade before the war, who hypnotized me then and charm me still, Blake's couplet comes to my mind:

If the sun and moon should doubt,
They'd immediately go out.

These writers, fortunately for us, their admirers, had certainly no intention of going out. In the days when Mr. Bernard Shaw was as busy obtaining publicity as he is now complaining about it, did you ever catch him doubting? Did you ever suddenly turn a

corner and come upon Mr. Belloc murmuring to himself: "I'm puzzled about this. There seems something to be said for both sides"? There was never a moment when Mr. Chesterton—to our delight, let it be said—did not know exactly what he thought about everything. Mr. Arnold Bennett, as he told us himself, did not agree with Mr. Chesterton and seemed to view his mental processes, or—to put it in the quaint dialect of the Five Towns—the functioning of Mr. Chesterton's intellectual machine, with considerable suspicion; but, on the other hand, Mr. Bennett himself had clearly never allowed the least shadow of doubt to enter his mind, had lived all his days, serene and confident, with Truth. Mr. Wells, so far as I can remember, never agreed with anybody and would put them into his novels to tell them so; but though he was always changing his mind, he always changed it decisively, with a click, and was absolutely certain each time that the last secret of the universe had been revealed to him. A happy cocksureness was in the air and all the papers.

Faced with all these gifted and dogmatic gentlemen, the darlings of his days, the inspiration of his nights, what was a poor lad, anxious to get the universe settled, to do but to go gaping from one to the other, stunned by their untroubled confidence in themselves, now accepting one set of opinions and now accepting another set of opinions. They were all equally certain (they are yet, but that is nothing, mere habit) and they were all different. You had the choice of half a dozen different

universes, each the one and only genuine article, for whose sake you must refuse all imitations. Obviously they could not be all in the right, though each one may have taken hold of some little portion of truth. Just as Hamlet discovered that one may smile and smile and be a villain, so too I found that one may write and write and yet be in the wrong; that it is one thing to believe, and constantly to proclaim the fact, that Truth dwells for ever in your study, and quite another thing for the lady actually to be there at all times and seasons. I began to wonder, and—alas!—I have been wondering ever since. It is true that certain of my betters, certain antique but not entirely faded figures, such as Shakespeare and Cervantes and old Montaigne, sometimes seem to me to be mere wonderers too, fellows who did not know their own minds, but can I honestly find any comfort in that fact? They were men of genius, and, anyhow, their day was long ago. My day is here and it finds me with nothing to say.

AT A CONCERT

WHAT a piece of work is the Albert Hall! How noble in the season! How infinite in capacity! Although I live almost in its shadow, I had not been inside for years before this afternoon, when I suddenly decided to attend a concert there. I knew very well that it would not be a good concert; but then I suspect that there are no more good concerts, not since the war, and that the last time I heard Nikisch and the London Symphony, or that miraculous evening when I heard Kreisler, Casals, and Bauer (or was it Pauer?) playing together, was the last of all the good concerts; not, you understand, of pleasant half-hours or so spent listening to music, but of evenings in the grand manner. But apart from this conviction, I had every reason to know that this would not be a good concert, for it consisted only of the works of Tchaikowsky, a gentleman who has his moments, but has too many nerves and too few brains for my taste. He will mutter and whimper, scream with rage, then grow moony over the samovar and stuff you with chocolate creams, until you want to knock him on the head with a stout fugue. There is no Russian composer, and so far as I can see there never will be a Russian composer, with whom I wish to spend a long Sunday afternoon. Nor did I particularly wish to hear the orchestra, nor the young lady who was to play the violin concerto and a few odds and ends and be encored and given large

bouquets. No, I think I must have gone to renew my acquaintance with the Albert Hall, and that is why I climbed innumerable stairs and sat in the middle of the topmost gallery.

There is no better place in London for a romantic idealist-philosopher than a seat in that gallery. So fantastic is the scene before you that you begin to feel that you must have invented it all. It is like something seen in a dream or remembered from Atlantis, or one of the illustrations to Mr. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*. I have spent hours, in dreams, wandering about such buildings, vacant and dim, rushing from gallery to gallery at last in a crazy panic. Incredible that merely by turning aside from Kensington Gore and climbing some steps, you should find yourself in such a place, looking down on people—important people, too, many of them—crawling about like ants. Is it to be wondered at that as yet no rumour of lighting by electricity has reached that vast roof, which still has its thousands of little gas-jets that hang in clusters and, strange as it may sound, look like pale yellow roses dangling from the roof? How fantastic and mysterious are those pieces of wire netting that are stretched across the dizzy space as if they were aerial hurdles! What could be nearer a boy's vision of a circus than that vast canopy which hides the central roof from our sight? But then, perhaps the place is a circus, a circus on the grand scale, whose ring is not down on the floor but in the space, the empty air round which the galleries, tier after tier, are ranged. And what strange creatures have performed in that ring!

—for has it not seen the dubious arguments and bad metaphors of the politicians come trotting out like old circus horses, and the unnecessary cadenzas of the violinists, the meaningless semiquavers and trills of the sopranos, all performing their tricks? Is there not clowning without end there, week after week, year after year, with bouquets in showers, tumults of applause, streets jammed with large motor-cars, sweating Press agents, and reporters scribbling for dear life?

When a few thousand more maggots had crept into their seats, I suddenly realized that a handful of them, far below, were the members of a full-sized orchestra assembling, and that the faint sounds I occasionally caught were the tuning-up sounds once so dear to my heart. It was impossible to have any sort of feeling on account of these mere specks, but had they been nearer I think I should have felt something of the old thrill. There was a time, in my teens, when I had a passion for orchestras. Not only did I love listening to them, but with true amorous inclusiveness I loved everything about them. I always counted the players, noted the position of all the instruments, the balance of strings to woodwind and brass, and whatever else there was to be remarked. The sight of the players, with their scarves, soft hats, pipes, and instrument cases, arriving or departing always gave me a thrill. To talk to one, perhaps over a beer, and hear gossip of the London Symphony, the Hallé, the Scottish, the Boston Symphony, the Weingartner, and so forth, was bliss. A good orchestral player seemed to me

then, and sometimes seems to me still, the happiest of mortals, with his camaraderie and innocent Bohemianism, his journeys here and there and his nightly adventures on the ocean of sound. There was only one thing better than being an instrumentalist, and that, of course, was being the conductor of a large orchestra—surely the grandest and most *puissant* of all our fellow creatures. Oh! to be a conductor, to weld a hundred men into one singing giant, to build up the most gorgeous arabesques of sound, to wave a hand and make the clamouring strings sink to a mutter, to wave again and hear the brass crashing out in triumph, to throw up a finger, then another and another, and to know that with every one the orchestra would bound forward into a still more ecstatic surge and sweep, to fling oneself forward and for a moment or so keep everything still, frozen, in the hollow of one's hand, and then to set them all singing and soaring, and in one final sweep, with the cymbals clashing at every flicker of one's eyelid, to sound the grand Amen! Many an hour I would spend, secreted in my bedroom or marching on a country road, conducting enormous invisible orchestras, whose symphonies were fully audible to me but would have appeared to other people merely like a number of hissing and groaning sounds that I alone was making. It was one of the happiest of my many idiocies.

A little later there appeared on the front of the platform a lady in white no bigger than my thumbnail, and at the sight of this missikin we all loudly applauded. Now I think I know why so many good

Roman citizens could watch unmoved the atrocities of the arena: it is because the places were so big, like this Albert Hall of ours. Had there suddenly appeared by the side of that tiny white figure a tiger about an inch and a half long, and this tiger had proceeded to eat its companion pigmy, I doubt if I should have been really stirred; it would have all been so far away, as unreal to me as a murder in the heart of China. This too may explain why so many musical atrocities are tolerated here. What are a false note or two, a crotchet debased into a quaver and a quaver promoted into a crotchet, a vile piece of phrasing, an occasional misinterpretation, where everything is so far away and only happening in a kind of dream? How is it possible to worry oneself about the mere niceties of art in a building that looks like an old-fashioned sketch of the Day of Judgment? I do not say that our violinist could be accused of all these faults, but I do say that she must not take our very liberal applause as a serious tribute to her genius. The fact is we were only too ready to applaud. If the end man of the very last row of second violins had been given a foreign name and perhaps a wig, and had been brought on to perform, I doubt if our applause would have been any the less enthusiastic. For my own part I will freely confess that I clapped my hands because I too felt like making some sort of noise in that colossal space, if only to convince myself that I had not died and become a blessed ghost. Moreover, any kind of human activity viewed from that appalling angle would have roused my enthusiasm. If the tiny

creature in white had made her appearance and merely thrown up and caught a microscopic orange or two, or beaten up some quite invisible eggs in a dish, the result would have been just the same for me, who would have clapped my hands for more oranges or eggs and felt proud of my gallant little species. Actually, I escaped before she finally disappeared, for my old acquaintance, "1812", a work that should amply revenge Napoleon for the loss of his Grand Army, was threatening; so I sought and found, rather to my astonishment, the outer air. There is no touch of a crazed dream, no suggestion of the Last Day, about Kensington, and I must confess that I was relieved to find myself there, in the fading pale gleams of wintry sunshine, stuffing some tobacco into my pipe as I walked home to tea and reality.

NOT HAVING THE TOURIST MIND

THE other day I learned by chance that one of my friends had told another and newer friend of mine that I had "the tourist mind". This observation made me very angry indeed. If it had been worlds away from the truth, if I had been described as a drug slave or one who took pleasure in beating little children, I should not have been so angry, but the judgment was one of those that only narrowly miss the truth and are therefore the most dangerous and most irritating of all. You may depend upon it that I have not the tourist mind, but my desires are such that a stupid person might easily imagine that I had. This friend is not stupid, but he is so preoccupied with his drawing and painting, shapes and colours, and the outside of things generally, that he cannot understand fine shades of character, and, like all his tribe, has no philosophy. He does not know what this tourist mind is that he talks of so glibly (the word "glibly" has no real meaning here, but it produces the requisite contemptuous effect), and he does not know the first thing about this mind of mine that he would try to label in his prattle. Let it be admitted that I am in love with travel, that I can dream over maps and discover a magic in shipping notices and railway time-tables, that there are few occasions when I would not rather pack a bag and be off than do anything else in the world. Does it follow, then, that I have the tourist mind? That

would be a babyish conclusion: life is not so simple as that; it is not—I would beg my friend to remember—a woodcut.

To have the tourist mind is to see this world as a museum. That is the reason why the tourist is so unpopular, a creature to be mulcted and then despised. Not only does he prefer dead things to the roaring stream of life, but he also contrives, with his gorgonish stare, to petrify the living, turning them into so many labelled curiosities. In the burgeoning tragi-comedy of a city he can see nothing beyond a collection of sights. I am not of this persuasion. I could not see even one tiny corner of this wide breathing world as a museum. Partly from laziness, partly from a prejudice against staring and poking about, on the one hand, and against being one of an admiring but driven herd, on the other, I never see the sights. Maps I love, but guide-books are my detestation. A list of things that must be seen in a strange town immediately roots me to my chair or merely sends me to the nearest café, theatre or bookshop. Few men on earth, I imagine, have missed more sights than I have. Cathedrals, historic houses, museums, picture galleries have all remained round the corner unglimped while I have idled about, wondering where all the waiters came from or buying strange odds and ends I did not want. The only battlefields I have ever visited were those I saw when the battles themselves were in progress, ordinary fields and lanes suddenly grown terrible, thick sown with death. This subject of sightseeing has compelled me to do more downright lying than any other.

Let us say I admit that I spent a night or two in the famous old town of Pomme de Terre or Kartoffeln. Then of course, the bores exclaim, I saw such and such a sight, the wonderful this, the marvellous that? If I tell them the truth, namely, that I never set eyes on the one, never went near the other, then they will begin: "What, you were two days in Pomme de Terre (or Kartoffeln) and never saw the such and such! Why . . . !" and off they will go, for at least five-and-twenty crawling minutes, telling me what I missed. Thus there is nothing for it but to lie and to say that I saw everything I was expected to see and that it surpassed all expectation.

I would rather go on lying, which becomes easier and easier somehow as the years hurry by, than go trailing about with a guide-book in my hand, collecting sights. It is very curious that I should have energy enough for most pursuits, but that half an hour's sightseeing should be too much for me. As soon as my curiosity has lost its fine edge—and half an hour is quite long enough for that—weariness descends upon me, so that I can hardly totter the length of the cathedral nave or crawl past the ranged Madonnas to the museum entrance. When I think of being tired, when there come back to my mind the moments when all my strength was spent, I do not remember the last shattering minutes of the football field, the mountain slope, the line of march, but I see again that table on which the peace was signed or those mummies and vases and antique heads or that wonderful West Front or that smallest church or largest town hall in Europe; once more the

endless marble corridors are torturing my feet and the hours stretch out between me and the next meal-time; and again in remembrance I am aching before the sights. This explains why I only visited the Wembley Exhibition once, and that only for a couple of hours or less during the very last week. At the very mention of that vast conglomeration of things that really ought to be seen, things that were an education in themselves, I used to feel rather tired, and when people insisted, as they always did insist, upon describing their visits to me, it was not long before I ached in every limb. There, evidently, was the tourist's Paradise, and no place for me. So I stayed quietly at home, not so many miles away, until the very last week, when everybody seemed to be going there to do a little shopping. Then I went with the other shoppers, walked through a sad concrete town, dived through a door and found myself in Nigeria. There I bought, for no reason that I could ever afterwards discover, a wooden Mumbo Jumbo about eighteen inches high that looked not unlike Chirgwin and really smelted of Africa. He is now stored away somewhere in a London furniture repository and at this very moment may be lying at the bottom of a packing-case working black magic.

No, the truth is that my mind is not the tourist's, but one somewhere between the traveller's and the tripper's. I might be described as a poetical tripper. It is the enchantment of distance and strange names on the map that holds me, and not the promise of sights. The atlas and not the guide-book is my

inspiration. I have a boyish delight in the thought of enormous journeys, beginning at the front door and ending somewhere at the other side of the world. The least thing will set me longing to be off. Only the other day, a whole morning's work was lost to me because I had caught sight of a tiny advertisement of a shipping company, which informed traders that its ships now sailed from Manchester—of all places—through the Panama Canal to California. I saw myself going to Manchester and hurrying through its drab streets until I suddenly turned a corner and beheld, as if by magic, masts and funnels; I saw myself crossing a gangway and then sliding out of Manchester down the Ship Canal for the distant glare of Colon and Panama; I saw myself sitting on a hatch that night with the mate or the second engineer, talking of our golden coast of California over a pipe or two of cut plug. All these and other things I saw, and I ached to be gone. I am under no illusion about such voyages and distant places, both of which I can readily conceive to be uncomfortable, dull and disappointing; but the magical gleam of far travel to places with names like a pageant does not fade from my mind.

One of the dullest evenings I have ever spent in my life was passed in San José, the capital of Costa Rica, a town perched on the Pacific slope of the Central American Andes, but I do not regret it, having known the rapturous thought of travelling there. It is one of the few disadvantages of life in this island of ours that the railways cannot achieve this glamorous appeal. Inverness is the most they

can manage, and it is not good enough for me. If I lived in New York, however, I should have to hurry past the railway stations, for there you may take a train for the very blue. I noticed the other day an advertisement of a train that roared you from the Hudson to Vera Cruz on the Mexican Gulf, a whole world away. I can well imagine that such a journey would be intolerably dull and that Vera Cruz is a baked misery of a town, but nevertheless if I lived in New York, sooner or later I should board that train, after being almost idiotically happy poring over epic time-tables. Never in my life, I think, did I envy a man so much as I did that nameless one who, when I asked him where he was going, said very quietly: "Up the Orinoco". It was just as if, with a touch on a spring, he had suddenly released a vast glittering pageant of far travel and fantastic destinations, of multi-coloured seas and blowing whales and flying fish, of coasts like bronze and steaming rivers in the jungle and brown faces chattering in an unknown tongue. I think of him now as the only anonymous poet I have ever met.

ON OVERLOOKING COVENT GARDEN

EVEN where we would not deliberately mislead, we are so ambiguous in this English of ours that already some persons have been lured to this page by a false scent, hoping to find here one of those pleasant little essays on London life whose popularity will seemingly outlast the frame of St. Paul's. But my Covent Garden is not the market but the Opera, and the overlooking is only my forgetfulness. Freud and his crew would sometimes seem to speak truth, for they tell us that we forget what the peering creature in the jungle of our unconscious minds wishes us to forget; and I see now why I never kept my promise about the Opera tickets. I was commissioned by some friends in the country to book seats at Covent Garden for two operas, and now the time has gone past when such seats are to be had either for love or money, or at least such love or money as I can furnish, and I, who promised so loudly and cheerfully, have done nothing. I did not really want them to go, could not understand why they should wish to do so, and now, it appears, have successfully if involuntarily prevented them from going. All this proves, if further proof should be wanted, that there is nothing so dead as an old faded passion, for time was when opera was almost the chief of my delights.

There are people, here and there, who retain a taste for this form of entertainment all their lives:

others again who have always been and always will be indifferent to it; but there is a third class of persons who once had a passion for it, as they had, perhaps, for Whitman or walking tours or chess or Swinburne, and have now lost all interest in the mongrel art. To this class I most certainly belong. Opera was one of the grand passionate affairs of my nonage. I would stand for hours in the rain to catch a glimpse of *Tannhäuser* or *Lohengrin*, and even save up my shillings to hear the thundering choruses of *Aida*, or *La Tosca* denouncing the police with the aid of sixteen first violins. If there was an opera within miles, I must go and hear it, otherwise my evening was in ruins. There was a time when I heard eleven operas in a fortnight, an astounding fit of debauchery this, which left me bankrupt and half idiotic for a month. And now, what a change! Last night, I believe, *Tristan and Isolde* were once more quaffing their philtre in this city, to the accompaniment of soulful blasts on the Teutonic trombone, but I did not give a fig for them and their nonsense. Not only was I not sorry that I was absent, I was quite glad. I never want to set eyes on the fat pawing pair again. Apart from Mozart's *Figaro* and one or two others, things that I have heard many a time, I do not care if I never again attend another performance of opera. And even for glorious *Figaro* I would not put myself now to any great inconvenience.

But during my operatic period I was a pure devotee of the art. I did not attend for social reasons. I did not even go, as so many do, merely to hear

a certain great singer, to collect another name useful in a conversational lull. It was the operas themselves that drew me, and so long as they were performed at all, they could count upon my enthusiastic presence. Among the most regular visitors to the provincial town I lived in was, I remember, a certain shabby little Italian Opera Company, and I could always be found among its not too numerous patrons. Even I, however, realized that these Italians made up a droll assembly, and their scanty scenery and properties, served up night after night, their acting and singing, their appearance, all tended to reduce the operas they performed to one rather monotonous dead level of heroics and tatters, of soaring spirit and weak though abundant flesh. All of them, men and women, principals and chorus, appeared to be the same size, shape, and age, namely, about five feet four, tubby, and fifty. If a tall thin young man had played with them, he would have seemed like a creature from another planet. The bass, I remember, was a little different from the others in being still rounded and fatter, and it was he, playing Mephistopheles, who stuck in the trap-door one night. Yet this Company had its moments. Their voices were hoarse, their figures all wrong, their scenery so faded that it was mere affectation pretending to change it, but they had passion and, at times, the grand manner. Their *Pagliacci* was perhaps the worst sung and the most dismally presented of any that I have seen, but it was, I think, the only one that ever carried any conviction as a piece of drama. They were at home in it, and by

dint of strutting and fuming and eye-rolling and gulping and sobbing with gusto and something like sincerity, they breathed a garlic-scented life into the thing. To see Englishmen, no matter how well trained, in such pieces is to realize at one and the same time the limitations of Italian Opera and our national temper, for they are obviously aware of the fact that they are making asses of themselves and so make us feel that we are attending a sad mockery, that it is high time these fellows washed their faces and put on their collars and ties.

Exactly what operas were performed by this forlorn but heroic Company I do not now remember, but I know that most of them were of the old stilted kind that refused to make the slightest concession to reality. How signally disappointing most operas are as pieces of drama! They would not be so disappointing if they had not an odd trick of arousing expectation, at least in the mind of romantic youth. I used to find the titles so intriguing that I could not rest until I had discovered what they were all about. To this day I could let my imagination play round such unknowns as *La Dame Blanche* or *Gazza Ladra* not without profit. But what anti-climaxes the pieces themselves were, even the best of them, after your dreams of them! I was never more disappointed in my life than I was the first time I saw *The Magic Flute*. I heard and loved, as I do to this day, the moonlight and gossamer overture, and what with that, the artful and lovely promise of the title, and some vague stories of its connexion with Freemasonry, my imagination caught fire and I felt a

thrill at the very sight of the name. But what a poor tawdry thing the reality was, with its pasteboard serpents and cotton-wool priesthood, its huddle of meaningless little scenes, compared with the lovely opera, romantic, glamorous, mystical, of my fervent dreams! I could build up a whole theory of life—though fortunately it would be a false one—on my attitude to this opera, so enchanting when unknown, so disillusioning in actuality.

It did not take me long, of course, to lose interest in the old stilted pieces and to cultivate a taste for later and sterner stuff, for realism and the sounding brass or symbolism and the muted strings. But now that I am, so to speak, out at the other end, in the bleak daylight of indifference, it is these later, more ambitious and more solemn operatics that seem to me the more boring affairs. In theory, opera combines in itself some half-dozen arts, but in actual practice it merely loses touch with all that is fine and moving in these arts and contrives to assemble all their cheapest tricks. Even where it is not cheap—and Wagner is hardly that—it remains crushingly, colossally boring. When Wagner is making his orchestra create for us the enchanted ripples of a legendary Rhine or is making it celebrate idyllic love in a forest, he is a god. But as soon as he puts his Wotans and Siegfrieds and Parsifals on the stage, so many heavy men who stand in one place for an hour, drearily wrestling with a narrative that nobody can understand, he is the very emperor of the bores. If I were to go back to opera at all, it would be to the very silly old-fashioned kind, which is half a

crazy melodrama and half a combined concert and ballet, which has its being in a purely artificial world that is like a toy. Given the opportunity, I would return to my Gonzalos and Lucias, who were not above dying twice if their voices held out and the audience were enthusiastic; to those inevitable peasants, the men so tanned and the women so pink and white, who never had anything to do beyond pairing off neatly, drinking from empty pasteboard tankards, and expressing melodious joy and sorrow; to those inns festooned with impossible flowers and those midnight dungeons and those backcloths in which incredible castles frowned from the summit of sugar-loaf mountains. To visit this world again, to hear true love born in the bird-like flutings of a soprano and at bay in the outrageous *portamentos* of the tenor, might even be a solace. But I cannot find it in Covent Garden, and I shall have to wait until I am benighted in Darlington or cast up by some huge wave of chance at the doors of the Bedford Corn Exchange.

IDEAS IN APRIL

LOOKING back at this last week-end, which I spent with friends in their country house, I find myself possessed by a most curious sensation. The visit was an experience with a quality of its own, but I cannot even begin to disengage, to define, that quality: I can only relate what happened. We had April weather, that is, hours of full June interspersed with cold intervals of wind and rain, fierce backward lashes from the tail of old Winter. I would find myself idling in the garden, watching the old stone walls and roofs coming to life, flushed with delicate pink, in the sunlight; or I would be sent, out through the orchard starred with blossom, to the meadow beyond to pick cowslips from under the hedge and watercresses from the hollow of the little stream. I was a man loitering through a miracle, casually arriving by the 5.35 to see the water of the world turned into wine. But there were also, as I have said, hours of rain and cold wind, and then I would find myself crouching over a fire and indulging, like every confirmed reader, in dips into my host's books. The ones nearest to hand chanced to be popular scientific works, expositions, largely for the benefit of the general reader, of various new theories in biology, physiology, psychology, and the like. One or two I read through, and the others I glanced at, and most of the time I spent indoors was passed in this fashion. And here too, you may say, were miracles, but they were very different from that enduring one of colour,

scent and sound that was taking place out of doors. There was piquancy in the contrast, and in that between my two states of mind.

As these authors were expositors rather than genuine creators of new knowledge, they had the unattractive manner we have learned to associate with their tribe, an arrogance, a lack of humour, an irritating cocksureness. Great scientists are men it is difficult not to admire, even to feel an affection for, if only because their vast learning is supported by an engaging, almost boyish, mixture of enthusiasm and diffidence; they do not wave away contemptuously other people's preoccupations, for which they have had no time, but regard them rather admiringly and wistfully; they have imagination and tenderness and an unsleeping sense of the wonder and mystery of this life. Even if you should think their discoveries so much mischievous moonshine, you would still find yourself compelled to revere them as characters: they are, perhaps, our modern saints. But little scientists commonly display none of these traits, and are too often bragging drunk with knowledge, so that you may see them battering life into the shape that appeals to them, riding rough-shod over other people's minds. All the gentlemen whose fierce manifestos I read this last week-end, in between the garden and the meadow as it were, belonged to this rough-riding school. Even the persons who find the matter of these books attractive must, I imagine, dislike the manner, unless they have a secret passion for being bullied, accounting the hours they devote to learning ill-spent unless they can find hoof-marks all

over their minds. For my own part, I found the matter of these books neither attractive nor profoundly disturbing, but simply rather droll.

There are, I suppose, three common attitudes towards such new knowledge. One large class of persons only acquire knowledge, ideas, early in life, and after that, having little or no intellectual curiosity, regard all new discoveries and theories as so much play or wild gibbering, of less importance than politics in Guatemala or a new way of painting the Parisian face. Then there are the people who run from one new theory to another, from William James to Bergson, Bergson to Croce, and so forth, who may be seen lapping up Vitalism or Relativity or Psycho-Analysis or Behaviourism with equal enthusiasm, who believe that the latest 'ism' will remould life and that the fashionable theorist alone will save the world. They contrive to turn science and philosophy into milliners' shops, where they can always be discovered feverishly trying on the last theory. It is very doubtful if these people ever apply the new knowledge they acquire to life at all, if they ever see its implications. The third type of mind always does this, and recoils in horror from what it sees. This type must not be confused with the first, from which it differs because it has genuine intellectual curiosity and cannot ignore the challenge of a new idea. But these people apply it to life, note its implications, with fatal (and quite unnecessary) thoroughness; they see it eating its way like acid through the fair garment of this world, disenchanting life at a touch. Before this vile inhuman

notion of things made its appearance, everything was warm, comfortable, human, full of friendliness and touched with beauty; but now, unless it is immediately and passionately refuted, all is lost; there are anarchists in the cellar and a tiger on the hearthrug. So as they argue and denounce, there is anger in their voices and the mingled light and shadow of courage and despair in their eyes, for they are men fighting for their homes, the old comfortable world they have come to know and love.

Being something of an odd mixture, I have long wavered between these two opposed attitudes, one part of my mind playing the cheerful curious busy-body among new ideas, the other part deeply resenting their chill intrusion, their corroding touch. But these two parts, having to live together, are gradually settling down to compose an attitude different from either of the previous ones, an attitude compounded of curiosity and an easy scepticism. The men I was reading this last week-end were all wedded, with no possibility of divorce, to various mechanistic theories of human life. They offered me endocrine glands, reflex action, and what not; they swept away consciousness, reason, mind; and all this and more they did with passion and enthusiasm. There was a time when such theorists, coming in to spoil everything, would have been infinitely disturbing, and I should have been awake all night angrily refuting them. But coming upon them the other day, when rain and a sudden iced wind would drive me from the lovely old pageant out of doors (and this loveliness—is it there in the things them-

selves, or is it only in my mind, or do we compose it between us? Who can say?), I found these grim scientific gentlemen at once rather touching and droll. The enthusiasm with which these mechanisms addressed their fellow mechanisms, the passion ~~for~~ truth revealed by these assembled glands, these automata of "behaviour", the ardour with which these machines displayed their wheels and springs—is there not something touching and droll here?

Novelists and dramatists with a sense of irony should try their hand at comedies in which savants are the only characters and the clash of ideas supplies the action. There is no lack of material. I observed, only the other day, a controversy between a psychologist and a philosopher (though it is possible that they both called themselves psychologists or both philosophers, for all I know), the argument turning on the nature of the mind. The psychologist declared that all idea of sovereign reason was ridiculous and that we were entirely at the mercy of our instincts. But he said this regretfully, as if it was only because his unbiassed judgment told him that such were the facts that he was taking up such an unpleasant position. On the other hand, the philosopher angrily protested that reason should and could govern our minds, and pointed out the distasteful consequences of the psychologist's theory, which seemed to him revolting. Thus, each of these learned gentlemen contrived to prove before he had done that the other was in the right, and I offer this as material for at least one capital little scene to any author who should attempt an April comedy of ideas.

PEACOCK PIE

WHETHER the actual world is becoming crazier or keeping to one level of dubious sanity I do not know, and neither do you. We can never accumulate and master the evidence. It is a question to be settled only by the gods, lolling in their cloudy dress circle, themselves the begetters of our more monstrous antics, the ballet-masters who direct our wilder capers. Even if by some fourth dimension hocus-pocus we could get into communication with some historians of the far future, the voice of distant posterity—and the very idea is revolting—even then we could not trust their verdict, for they themselves would probably seem to us as mad as hatters and therefore no judges of our sanity. We can say little or nothing, then, about the wits of the actual world, a total too stupendous to be grasped; but, on the other hand, we can say a good deal about the world that is reported and revealed to us by the newspapers. That world is undoubtedly getting more and more crazy. To read, as I have just been doing, a popular Sunday newspaper in these days is to have a glimpse of a life as fantastic as that in the Arabia of the Thousand - and - One Nights. Not all the Barber's brothers had adventures more strange than the incidents reported in column after column of the paper I have this moment put down by the side of my chair. It turns your Sunday morning into a talk with Caliban: the isle is full of noises. You would

not dare put one-half these things you read into the wildest work of fiction; and if these public prints are to be trusted as guides, then the world is indeed moving frantically through more and more gorgeous fits of insanity: you hear it gibbering.

I could write a hundred essays on the strange tidings this sheet has brought me. Column after column, crammed, you might say, with the Anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders, offers its marvels, its fantastic examples of human idiocy, that I could go gaping at through essay after essay. I could write a kind of wild travel book on this Laputa I am allowed to see every Sunday. As it is, I have been hesitating before subject after subject, all dropping fat, until at last, in despair, I have decided to content myself with one of the least important items of information. It is a tiny paragraph, tossed before your eyes quite casually, and probably only there to fill up a spare inch of space, just one of a thousand scraps of news. Obviously it meant nothing to the newspaper people, who handle moonshine by the ton, but to my mind it was so strange that it might have been sent to the paper by the Mad Hatter himself. It is headed *Peacock Pie*, and begins by informing us, quietly, that such a piece of pastry has just furnished the dish of honour at a banquet. Reading this, my curiosity was aroused at once. I have never thought of peacock pie as being within the scope of practical politics in the kitchen. It seems like a rumour from the court of Sardanapalus; an image from some bright fable of a Renaissance duke or mad cardinal, whose pages in

crimson velvet carry it, shining, golden, and most fantastically moulded, on high to the banquet hall. But there is about it too a nursery-rhyme air. If I saw peacock pie down on the menu, I should not be surprised to find that Old King Cole was at the head of the table, that little Jack Horner and Miss Muffet were my neighbours, that Tom Tucker and the Lion and the Unicorn were among the entertainers. It seems like a child's idea of a rich dish, for it does not really appeal to the palate but lures us by way of the eye and the imagination. In some confused fashion we think of the peacock being a magnificent creature for a pie, not because we know it has an exquisite flavour, but simply because its gorgeous colouring has captured our imagination. It may, for all I know to the contrary, be a scraggy, rough, and tasteless fowl; but its appearance enchant us, and as we are children still at heart, we still want to eat everything we admire. In peacock pie we feel we have all the bloom and pride of summer inside a golden crust.

Two streams of legend, then, unite to float this strange dish triumphantly in our imagination, one from the histories of mad luxurious princes, fascinating us with their gorgeous depravity, and the other from the brightly coloured pictures of the nursery, whose enchantments for ever remain with us. To see it suddenly achieve reality, a commonplace mention in a newspaper as if it were a bicycle or a box of soap, is to be at once startled into attention. What banquet is this for which old gardens are robbed of their glimmering, strutting kings? Who

are these guests in whose honour a pie is delivered from the kitchens of fantasy? The very next line of the paragraph tells us, and as we read we rub our eyes. Those guests are no other than the members of the Savoy Orpheans Band, whose saxophones have made merry so many nights beside the dark old Thames, whose curious cynical-sentimental little tunes have been wafted through so many hundred miles of darkness by the magic we call electricity. They come from we know not where, these sleek dark musicians, with their strange shining instruments and their perpetually tapping feet, and they set us twinkling in the dance, twang-twang-twanging away all our troubles, our Coal Commissions, Geneva Conferences. long lines of workless men, and all the wreckage ~~on~~ of our dreams; and so at last we kill for them our peacocks and bid our chefs turn for an hour or so to starry and fabulous diversions. Meanwhile, our musicians, who have just been rollicking on *The Bam Bam Bammy Shore*, and will soon be tootling and tapping away at *Cutie*, lay aside their saxophones and trombones and banjos and descend upon us, a grave but triumphant body of men, that we may fill their glasses with champagne, spread eight courses before them, and come at last to offering them our homage over the ruins of a peacock pie.

That our strummers of the dance should be so fantastically honoured throws a light upon our world and proffers a theme for half a hundred widely different discourses. Your thundering prophet, the ancestral voice among us, will hold it over us as an

example of our childishness or worse, our growing habit of fiddling during the conflagration, and so will butcher us to make a Roman parallel. Your cynic will point his long, lean forefinger and his thin bitter mirth, and then retire with a shrug. But we, being, I trust, humorists of the old order, tolerant but not without irony, will note the mounting tide of folly, not unillumined by a fleeting ray of poetry, and will laugh our easy laugh. But the tale, contained in half a dozen lines of newspaper print yet crazy enough for Haroun al Raschid, is not yet fully told. Who gave this banquet? Who set before the Savoy Band its dish of peacock pie? Who are these sybarites and passionate lovers of the dance, these mad princes who would waste the world for a single meal, these modern feasters whose prodigality is a poetical anachronism? In what strange place shall we find these Herods of ours? Where now does Sardanapalus keep his court, Lucullus spread his table? The answer is here in this paragraph, and it shall be stated in the very words I found there: the banquet was given, we are told, "by a number of prominent citizens of Glasgow". O World! O Life! O Time!

Let us take in our papers and lean back in our chairs, laughing and growing fat while the rest of the world tries to starve and bully itself into growing thin. If we might adapt old Falstaff's remark, we can say that these prints will devise matter enough out of this Shallow, the world, to keep us in continual laughter the wearing out of many fashions. We may have thought upon our coming days with

something like melancholy. It may well be that good manners, good literature, and good liquor will disappear from the world; that all young men will look and act like governesses and all the girls look like either jockeys or Portuguese moneylenders; that our last hours will be spent among Theosophists and lovers of nature in sandals; but let us take heart, for the tide of folly mounts ever higher and has even now submerged the grey roofs of Glasgow. Keep the good ship trim, and on this tide we may float into ever more gorgeous and crazier sunsets, laughing inextinguishably.

MONOLOGUE ON A BLUNDERER

"I SEE that a young acquaintance of mine, whose name may possibly be known to one or two, has given up professional authorship and has decided to teach small boys in some wretched colony. I am sorry, for somehow I liked the fellow in spite of his stupidity; but I cannot say I am surprised. I knew very well he would not last, and have told him so more than once. If you come up to London and turn author, as he did, you have to take your work seriously, you have to organize the business, or nothing will come of it. I am not thinking now of the writing part—though even there he acted stupidly. As I told him more than once, in these days you must be either low-brow or high-brow, one or the other, or where are you? But I could never get him to see it. He would blather something about trying to get down on paper what had seemed to him significant and exciting in life no matter what kind of brow it appealed to, with the result that he was nowhere. He would get emotional and then drive away the people who think that feelings should be kept out of literature, and then he would have ideas and so displease the set who will have it that there should be nothing but emotions in literature. It did not matter to me one way or the other, but I wanted to see him come to the front. And he could have done it if he had only tried. 'A stunt. That's what you want,' I would tell him, and then suggest

that he should write novels in which only one character was sane, or plays without people in them, to be demonstrated on blackboards, or free verse that left out not only the stops and capitals but also the verbs, or anything new and amusing. But he only laughed. (I wonder if he is laughing now.) Why, even in the one or two novels he did write, he did not try to make them interesting. He deliberately ruined their chances, for he went and left out all the people, Mrs. X and old Y and Lady Z, who usually appear, very thinly disguised, in all the really brilliant novels. The result was, of course, that no one could find anything in his stories to talk about, and you could dine out for months and never hear his name mentioned."

"No, he would sit at home there, sweating away at his sentences, trying to make everything neat and pretty, just as if he were living a hundred years ago. I told him that if he was not careful he would be turning himself into another Stevenson, and that ought to have frightened him, but somehow it didn't. I pointed out to him that Stevenson was nowhere now, that the literary editor of one of our really important weeklies had said that any undergraduate could write Stevenson's essays, and that this editor ought to know as he seemed to employ a number of undergraduates and had probably had not a little trouble preventing them writing like Stevenson for his paper. But the fellow went on, scribbling and crossing out and scribbling again, just as if this fine writing business was not finished with long ago. And if he was not messing about with his sentences,

he would be reading, and not, mind you, reading with one eye on the market, as it were, but just browsing over anything, all manner of old junk. If he had kept to the fashions, minor Elizabethan and Restoration plays, eighteenth-century French novelists, and so on, it would not have mattered, but he would go and waste his time with anything, even stuff like Fielding and Scott. Scott!"

"In the meantime, the other part of his business as a young author, the getting about and getting known part, was being absolutely neglected. Once or twice I have heard him grumble because his name was not better known, and I used to wonder at it myself until I found out what he did and what he didn't do. Now, I wonder that anybody knew his name, and that he lasted the time he did. Why, he went nowhere, absolutely nowhere! Of the four or five rich women who count in literary London, he knew not one. You never met him at lunch anywhere. He never made the slightest attempt to cultivate A and B, never even sent them his books. Lady Z might never have existed so far as he knew or cared, with the result, of course, that *he* did not exist for Lady Z, with the further result that his real literary life never began. The only time he ever went anywhere was to an evening at Mrs. X's (an extremely useful invitation, as I told him at the time), and then he swore that he would never go there again, or to any other similar place. The fact is that he insisted upon taking his wife with him, and then was furious because every one ignored her. (And well they might. What could he expect?—a thin, anxious-looking

little creature from nowhere, with cheap cotton frocks, and great eyes that followed her husband round the room; no style, no spirit. I remember her well.) It was just like him to go and marry a little nobody of this kind, who would colour up at Horace's best remarks and looked quite sick, I believe, that evening when she heard some of Letitia's famous anecdotes; and then, after the initial mistake of tying himself up with her (which, after all, was soon remedied), to waste his time mooning round with her and her precious infants in their poky little place. And then, to crown everything, to take her where she was not wanted and fly into a rage because people ignored her and one or two smart things were said! Here was a man who deliberately put obstacles in his own way."

"He would never even let me put him down for the Ink Club, where literary people admire and entertain one another in the guise of foreign celebrities. He never went near the Society of Potboilers, with the result that he never saw their price-lists and had no idea of the state of the fiction market. Morbid ruralism might have gone down to forty-five and Mayfair pornography risen to ninety-eight without his knowing anything about it. As for publicity, which is as important in literature as it is now in anything else, he had no more idea of it than a child. He must have plunged into authorship without ever really taking thought. I remember saying to him once: 'Your publicity agent doesn't seem to be earning his money. I never see your name about.' His stare was sufficiently wide to show me that he

didn't employ one. I asked him then if he didn't find it a bore writing the paragraphs and sending them in himself. And then, incredible as it sounds, I discovered that not only did he not write any paragraphs about himself and send them in to the gossip editors, but that he had not the slightest idea that anybody else did. No wonder that I never saw his name about, that people never read that the brilliant young writer had just returned from Vienna or had just left for Siena. (Not that he ever went to such places. He always said he couldn't afford it, probably meaning that he couldn't afford to take the whole lot of them away, just as if he were some suburban bank clerk or shop assistant. A man with a real literary temperament, a sensitive man, would have seen that he could afford to take himself away to wherever he wanted to go.) But even when I had explained the whole paragraph business to him, and pointed out how necessary it was to be mentioned once a week somewhere or other, he would have nothing to do with it, was too lazy to sit down and sketch out a few paragraphs on the lines I suggested."

"So finally I told him that if he did not follow my advice, I didn't give him another year in literary life. I told him exactly what to do. I told him to put in about two hours' dictation in the morning and that would clear away the writing stuff, and then he could settle down and map out his day properly, write a par or two, see the right people, show himself at a first night, and so on and so forth. I wanted to tell him, too, to clear his little nobody of a wife and his noisy infants out of the way, and, if possible, to

run an amusing affair with somebody that would get his name about, but somehow when it came to the point I seemed to shrink from mentioning it. There was something about the fellow that somehow prevented you from saying certain things to his face. There were a good many smart things said about him (and a really funny one about his wife at Mrs. X's) and people were always going to repeat them to him on the rare occasions when he turned up—a hefty chap, too, but with a rather babyish frowning look—but for some odd reason they never did. And now they never will, for I was right and he had to give it up and take to teaching awful young colonials somewhere at the other side of the world. There, I suppose, when he has the time, he will be able to scribble and read old stuff and moon round with his family to his heart's content, and perhaps he will have realized by now that he was never meant to be an author.”

A YOUNG MAN OF PROMISE

As I have already commented on the blunders of a young author who found it difficult to take his profession seriously, it is only fair that I should make haste to praise a young author of another metal when I should find him. If I must blame the blunderer, then I must also commend the wise young man, whose conduct knows nothing of such follies as I have denounced. It would not be difficult to produce from my acquaintance half a dozen young writers who would serve as subjects for such eulogies; but I prefer to deal with someone who is not known to me. Chance has brought such a person under my notice. I do not know his name, his works, his mode of life, indeed, anything about him, beyond the fact that he is responsible for a certain advertisement that caught my eye only a few days ago. It was prominently displayed in the personal column of the *Morning Post*, and runs as follows: "Author, young and presentable, recently come to London, of excellent professional family, wishes to become acquainted with some smart people". And then there follows a box number to which smart people are asked to write.

To say that I know nothing about him, after producing this advertisement, is clearly untrue. It tells a good deal. We know that he is an author and therefore a fit subject for any little appreciation that might follow these introductory remarks. We know

too that he is both young and presentable. Many authors are not young but are old, worn, grey, irretrievably lost in tobacco smoke and conceit. If smart people are to know authors at all, obviously they are not going to take up with such dodderers. Then again, many authors are not presentable. I have known many who were certainly unfit to be seen in any decent drawing-room, fellows with baggy trousers, dubious soft collars and heavy boots, who would sprawl about the place as if it were a tap-room, who would talk for hours at the top of their uncouth provincial voices. Even others, who are more civilized, can hardly be described as presentable, though their gaucheries and provincialisms might perhaps pass unrecognized, be lacking in direct offensiveness, on a crowded evening. But a really presentable author is something of a rarity, which explains why smart people have to be so careful. We know too that our young writer has recently come to London. This is a fact of some importance to his prospective hosts and hostesses because it means that he has not had time to collect the wrong kind of people, to make acquaintances and even friends in all manner of odd holes and corners as so many young men do. Nothing is more distressing than to take up a promising youth, introducing him here and there, and then to discover that he is hand in glove with the awful Smiths, the revolting Robinsons.

But even if an author is young and presentable, we still want to know more about him. A great many authors—and it would be absurd to allow our love

of literature, our admiration of genius, to prevent us from facing the fact—come from nowhere; and their origins are such as to make any inquiry into them a most tactless proceeding. Some of them have risen from the gutter. Others, and these not the least important, have been the children of small tradesmen and the like. Befriending persons of this kind, you take the risk of having some impossible perspiring fishmonger descending upon you and wringing your hand, or some little linen draper telling you that he is pleased to meet you. Not only that, but it is clear that however carefully a young man may act in company, guarding himself against solecisms of every description, unless he has been properly brought up, unless he has been accustomed to good society at home, his veneer of refinement will crack sooner or later and reveal the vulgarity beneath. A man may write masterpieces and have somewhere in the background a family too appalling to be mentioned; but if he is offering himself as a guest, a very different matter from merely offering himself as an artist, some guarantee that he belongs to a respectable family is necessary. If it is a good family, so much the better. Therefore, our young author of the advertisement does well to mention that he is “of excellent professional family”. Nor is the “excellent” superfluous, because in these days professional families are not what they were. All sorts of people are crowding into the professions. But as it is, “excellent professional family”, though it might be better, should carry him anywhere.

Now let us look at the question from the other

side, that of the young author himself. We have seen that he is the sort of person who can safely be taken up, entertained, introduced to people of consequence. But by whom? We know; and so, fortunately for himself and his prospects, does our young author, who does not hesitate to say so. The answer is, of course, by "some smart people". He might have said in his advertisement that he merely wished to have companionship, to know some persons with similar tastes, perhaps in the hope that some of them would turn out to be smart people. But no, he declares outright that he wishes to become acquainted with some smart people, and thereby wins our admiration for both his wisdom and his courage. He is wise enough to know that only smart people will be of any use to him and that it is foolish to encumber oneself with acquaintances of no importance, suburban nobodies and the like. But while many of us may have sufficient wisdom to recognize the best when we see it, few of us have the courage to stand up and say that we will be content with nothing less. We are told that a favourite remark of a well-known modern writer, whose quiet distinction of thought and phrase is easily identified, is "The best is good enough for me". Here he has a worthy disciple. Consider the position of this young author who has recently come to London. No longer surrounded by the members of his excellent professional family; lonely (though always presentable) in his still unfamiliar rooms; rising from his manuscripts to pace the streets where no smile, no word of greeting, can await him; anxious, like all true artists,

to reveal himself, his dreams and aspirations, to a sympathetic companion; in such a position he could hardly be blamed if he recklessly made acquaintances without any thought of the future. Yet knowing that it is his business to meet smart people and only smart people, he has the courage to endure his loneliness, empty days, friendless nights, rather than lower his standard and thereby endanger his career at the outset. We can imagine him sitting there in his silent lodgings, into which no friendly face has peeped these many days, waiting that hour, which Time will ripen, when once more he will be able to bow and smile and talk, when he will be entirely surrounded by smart people.

He would not be the man he is, however, if he had not realized that something else was necessary. He might spend the rest of his life in those rooms vainly awaiting the arrival of smart people. How are they to know that he is there and that he is emphatically their man just as they are his people? They will never know unless they are told, and the only person who can tell them is our young author himself. We are now living, as the Sayings of the Week in next Sunday's papers will amply demonstrate, in an age of advertisement, and there is no reason why we should not advertise for friends, letting the right kind of people know that we are there waiting for them. This, then, is what our young author did, and I applaud him for it and can only hope that by this time he has weeded out the really smart people from the people who are only pretending to be smart (who no doubt flooded his post-

box with their replies), and that he will be soon seen everywhere, a little less young than he was before perhaps, but even more presentable. He has made a good beginning—though it is only fair to warn him that he must increase his efforts and not relax as he will doubtless be tempted to do—and if he will only let me know his name, I promise to follow his career step by step, making it the text for further little appreciations of this kind. Too often we see the young, shining-eyed, grasping with foot and hand the ladder of Success, and yet neglect to give them a passing cheer.

HAVING COVERED THE CARD TABLE

EVERYBODY agreed that the card table needed a new covering. In place of that smooth green sward which makes the tournament of hearts and spades a delight to the eye, our card table had long been showing us a field that looked like some dreary recreation ground in a little industrial town, all faded, patchy, grey, fit for nothing better than sixes of clubs. There was talk of calling in the local carpenter, but I would not hear of it. I told them I would do it myself. They were surprised, humorous, indulgent, but I persisted. I had already examined the table and had come to the conclusion that it would furnish me with a pleasant little job, well within my very limited range of craftsmanship. The sides, which apparently held in position the baize or felt (actually it is felt, though everybody thinks it is baize), were screwed on, so that they could easily be removed, and the old cloth torn off and the new tacked on without much difficulty. I was not to be defrauded of so much happy screwing and tacking, so much stretching of smooth bright green cloth, by any bored artisan. I bought some felt and came hurrying back with it almost as if it were some new music or a parcel of books, and then, having surrounded myself with screwdrivers, scissors, hammers, tacks, pipes, tobacco, and matches, I spent a solidly happy morning.

It is very odd that I should thus find myself more and more interested in working with my hands. I would seem to have reversed the usual progress in the hobbies of men, who commonly begin with the boy's carpentering outfit (complete on card) and gradually find their way to books and ideas. When I was a boy, however, I hated handiwork, and cared for nothing but books and games. The *Boy's Own Paper* showered instructions on me in vain, and I could pass by the most glorious set of tools, rows of gleaming chisels and gouges, without a thrill. No lop-sided boat of my laborious creation ever waddled out from the shore to heel over in the middle of the park lake or village pond. I never made anything, and did not possess even a pocket-knife. Christmas and birthdays brought me books, foot-balls, cricket-bats, single-sticks, and the like, and the only time I ever received anything to build up (it was a gigantic loop-the-loop contrivance, made up of hundreds and hundreds of little pieces of stiff cardboard: my father finally erected it), I was disgusted. At one high school that I attended for a season there was a period set aside for what was called "manual work", when pencil-boxes and iron paper-weights came clumsily and mournfully into being, and this period was a misery to me, whose shapeless bits of wood and pieces of battered metal were for ever held up to derision. In all other matters but this of craftsmanship, I was the conventional boy, a ferocious full back, a slogging batsman, a rapturous student of pantomime, good for three helpings of suet pudding, but for the rest I pre-

ferred the inside of a book to the inside of a steam engine and never even touched a hammer if I could avoid it.

When I say that I bought my first box of tools only a few years ago, a light will be thrown on my curious history. It seems as if I am becoming more and more interested in those things that I neglected in my boyhood. Nowadays I like to know why the wheels go round. I have something of a passion, if not an openly declared one, for what my friend the etcher happily calls "gadgetry". I have not only mended a gramophone and a typewriter, but am frequently to be found boasting about it. As yet I have not achieved a workshop, but I am rapidly becoming one of those men who do the little jobs about the house. By the time I am an old man, I shall probably be completely indifferent to books, having taken to fretwork and Meccano sets. As a craftsman, I am still a blundering novice, but the enthusiasm is there and time will ripen all. My planing is still contemptible; my sawing is weak; but my screwing and nailing are now almost up to professional standard, being sure, cool, masterful. This covering of the card table was my opportunity, for there were fourteen trim screws to be taken out and put in again, and tacks innumerable to hold the smooth green felt in position. It would be hard to say which gives me the more pleasure, the tack, that little epigram of the nailbox, demanding only a tiny push with the finger and then a jolly crack with the hammer, or the screw, so subtle and so enduring, with its initial outburst of wilfulness followed by its

gradual submission, until at last it seems to conquer the material almost of its own accord.

Perhaps, though, the screw gives us the finer pleasure. I enjoyed every moment with those fourteen, enjoyed their brief effort at resistance, their crescendo of easy exit, their snug re-entry. Compelled as I am to deal so largely in human stuff, is it to be wondered at that I should find such delight in screws? I spend my days poring over the records of men's thoughts and dreams, wondering at their courage and timidity and impudence and vanity, praising here and blaming there, losing myself in the shadowy Walpurgis Night that we call literature. I see my fellow creatures pretending to be better and wiser than they are or more base and foolish, counterfeiting emotions they have never really known or hiding feelings that have shaken them for years. I spend hours and hours spinning theories or absorbing some other man's ideas, only to find, on looking back, that all is moonshine. I take mind and heart to this subject and that, pour myself out and then wrestle with the stubborn sheets, yet at the end I do not know whether anything has been created, whether it is not all idle vanity. There are perhaps a few moments of intense satisfaction for me while the work is in hand; there is a brief delight in the turning of a dangerous corner; and then nothing but fret and labour that is at once hard and yet fantastic until the work is done and I am free to juggle lazily with the next dream. If I get no praise for what I have done, then I am heartsick; but if praise does come my way, then it seems to me foolish

and fulsome and I am irritated or embarrassed. So it goes on. This way of life is my own choice and I would have no other, not even though I should have my "yachts and string-quartets"; but sometimes there is a joy in taking leave of it, in stretching green felt across the top of a card table, in turning home a good solid screw.

With a screw, biting its way into the woodwork and staying there if need be for half a century or, if you will, returning to your hand, the very same screw, within the next five minutes, you know where you are. It was devised for one kind of work, and that work it will do. It cheats neither itself nor you, is as definite, as rigid, as this other stuff with which I commonly deal is shifty and shadowy, maliciously protean. When you have tightened the last of your handful of screws, you can survey your work with solid contentment: something new has been created, if only the cover of a card table, and its existence cannot be argued away. My screwing and scissoring and hammering are done, and now our shining kings and queens and knaves have a new smooth lawn for their strange encounters. A man with such jobs to do daylong, measuring the work with a wise eye, now taking up his screwdriver, now his scissors, now his hammer, is in no bad case, if, that is, he has enough in his pocket at the day's end for his steak and beer and baccy and occasional visit to the play. A man so situated is a churl if he grumbles. On the other hand, if he is bundled into a roaring great factory and there has to pass the whole day holding or cutting the felt, or hammering in tacks, or putting

screws in holes while another man turns the screw-driver, then we can hardly blame him if he comes to the conclusion that he is being cheated, if he turns into a man with a grievance. He thinks that he is being cheated out of money, but whether he is or not, the fact remains that he is certainly being cheated out of something even more important, namely, a decent and amusing job, that honest and engrossing work which is also great fun. There was a time when all work was of the kind that most of us at some time or other have performed purely to amuse ourselves, just as I covered the card table: we have—I speak for both sexes—dug up gardens, mown grass, picked fruit, woven and dyed cloth, sailed boats, made shelves and cupboards, knitted stockings, soled boots, cut down trees, printed books, and so forth. But I have yet to meet anybody who went to work in a factory for fun, who spent his leisure in taking part in mass production. The world will not be happy when all the economists have agreed together and have regimented us into equal hours and equal wages, but when everybody has more work, real work, to do, when we are all happily covering card tables through the long day and have just leisure enough for an odd rubber or two before we go to bed.

AMERICAN NOTES

THESE last few weeks I seem to have passed half my waking hours in the company of American visitors, now swarming into Town. Time after time I have found myself lunching in New York or having tea in Chicago, so that now I talk glibly of "next fall" or the Middle-West. I have been able to gather a wealth of impressions without any Ellis Island passing judgment on my morals, without being compelled to address Women's Clubs or to eat new coconut cake and ice-cream for dinner, and so I have trifled with the thought of celebrating my good fortune by writing, here in London, one of those familiar books on America. It would not be difficult. The history and geography I could look up in the encyclopædia. Old numbers of the New York comic papers would supply me with the handful of funny stories that must be sprinkled throughout the volume. The necessary photographs, of Niagara Falls (American side), the Woolworth Building, that large railway station in New York whose name I cannot remember, and President Coolidge, would be easily obtained. I could spend at least two chapters declaring emphatically that the Americans are a great people, that I found them kind and hospitable, most kind and hospitable, a great people. I might add my belief that the world's future is in their hands, but I should not do that until I knew for certain that my prospective lecture fees and advance royalties in

America had passed a necessary minimum. Such a book, easily written and quite worthless, might very well slip into one of those select lists of books—that-should-be-read-this-season that mean so much to us scribblers. There might be money in it, as there so often is in mere impudence. But while still uncertain as to the possible gains, I will content myself with proffering a few notes, mere glimpses of the treasure I am hoarding.

The trouble about the Americans is that they are neither flesh nor fowl. Our whole attitude towards them is complicated by the manner of our first approach. It seems reasonable, at first, to do what many English people do, and regard them as so many "cousins from across the sea". These pleasant persons, you say, are not fantastic in garb and speech and gesture like Greeks or Russians; they speak what is, in spite of growing differences, our own language; they look not unlike ourselves; so these are not aliens but kinsmen; and all is well. But all is far from well. If this is our approach, irritation quickly follows. We begin with likeness, and discover surprising differences. It is annoying to find that persons so like ourselves can be so stupid as to think and behave in such a strange manner. A cousin should have sufficient sense to refrain from calling a railway station a "depot". Just as our relatives can irritate us far more than our neighbours, so these wilfully eccentric kinsmen prove to be more annoying than blank foreigners. Prejudice sets in, and we end by confounding the whole strange tribe. Therefore it is better to begin by regarding them, as I prefer to do,

as aliens, people as foreign as Lithuanians or Turks, to concentrate at first on the differences and then to stumble, gradually and happily, upon likeness after likeness to ourselves. If these are foreigners, we say at last, then they are the pleasantest the world can show; and this is a conclusion at once more amiable and profitable than the other. There is, however, still trouble ahead.

But before launching my grand final insult, let me loose a covering flotilla of pleasant little impressions. Let me begin by saying that the more I see of the Americans, the less I can understand the all too common assumption that they are a very conceited and boastful race, and the more puzzled I am by their own frequent apologies for these other, and to me mythical, Americans who are very conceited and boastful. I may have been fortunate in my encounters, but I cannot help suspecting that these persons who are supposed to tell you that they won the war or that everything in America is bigger and better, are the mythical Yankees who say "I guess and calc'late", creatures who live in the same world as the Irishmen who cry "Be jabers!" and the Scotsmen who begin every sentence with "Hoots awa', mon!" And, after all, on the score of conceit, Europe has little to learn. For imperturbable and really gross self-satisfaction, give me the public-school-and-university Englishman, the gentleman who regards a lack of interest in cricket as a form of awful perversion, who roars with laughter at some harmless person who does not happen to be fully acquainted with all the etiquette of the hunting-field.

For an utter incapacity to understand any other life or point of view, give me the first Frenchman you meet on the boulevards. For solemn, colossal, staggering vanity, give me the German pedagogue. Compared with these, the American seems to be modest, too modest, almost wistful in his desire to learn from other people, in his naïve attempts to win a little commendation from Europeans. The danger with most of the Americans I meet (who may, of course, be quite different from those who stay at home) is that they are not American enough, are not sufficiently self-satisfied, are sometimes too anxious to turn themselves into English country-house snobs, insufferable *boulevardiers*, stupid German pedagogues. And for the rest, I must freely acknowledge my sense of American kindness and generosity, which seem to proceed from a downright goodness of heart, and the accompanying enthusiasm for all manner of people and activities. It is impossible not to admire persons so energetic, healthy, sensible, such pretty women and robust men. Time and again, in half a hundred different ways, as hosts, guests, companions, they have made me feel ashamed of myself and my countrymen.

My relations with them are, however, disastrously complicated by a circumstance for which I make haste to apologize, though for the life of me I cannot see how the matter is to be mended. The fact is that Americans never seem to me to be real people at all. They are as unreal as Chinamen, but as they look and talk like real people and do not seem merely so many pieces of lacquer and porcelain, as Chinamen

do, I therefore think of them as a kind of magnificent automata. But beyond that I cannot go. As individuals, they never achieve any kind of reality for me. I cannot believe, in my heart of hearts, that they have dreams and desires and immortal souls. That they should have invented the psychological theory known as Behaviourism, which abolishes the consciousness and explains us in terms of behaviour, of reaction to stimuli, seems to me only right and proper, for that is indeed how I see them, as so much behaviour, so much flesh and nerves, all cleaned and dressed up and made sensible and polite and pleasant, and set going for a time. I never believe that they have any consciousnesses, that there is a secret and urgent life going on somewhere in their heads. I cannot think of them existing as individuals to themselves. When the American party, at which I was the only English guest, broke up the other night, I really doubted whether the others went anywhere at all, and imagined them merely crumpling up, vanishing into space, as soon as the door was closed upon them.

I can only think of them moving and acting in masses, just as they seem to talk as one man or woman, everybody saying the same thing at the same time; so that when I hear that So-and-so has sold fifty thousand copies of his new book in America, I have a picture in my mind of fifty thousand Americans going in a solid body to buy the book. Accounts of enormous fires or railway accidents involving hundreds of lives, leave me entirely unmoved if they come from America, because the

obvious unreality of the people concerned makes it impossible that they should be really hurt or killed. I feel that they have merely been packed away somewhere, now stopped just as they were once set in motion. This being my attitude, a visit there would be a colossal adventure, because either the people would gradually become real, one after another surprisingly developing mind and soul, or I should find myself the one real person among millions and millions of automata and would probably turn solipsist in the end. It may be that the wholesale murders on that continent are simply the work of strangers who have taken refuge in solipsism and believe that they are merely indulging in an amusing shadow-play by turning these animated creatures into cold corpses. It is more than likely, too, this life being so droll, that all the Americans I have met these last few weeks, those hurrying, smiling, loquacious persons, have already arrived at the conclusion that I and my like are equally unreal. At this very moment they are probably telling themselves that we cannot possibly have any real existence, and one or two of them may even be writing essays on the subject. We shall do well to conclude with such a chastening thought.

MY REVUE

THERE are some people—we have all met them—who do not seem able to understand how difficult it is for truth to flourish in this world, and how easy it is for legends, the fat weeds in this rank garden of ours, to multiply. To me it is a marvel how the little facts ever contrive to win their way through; I am perpetually surprised, not by the existence of myths, but by their occasional passing out of existence. I am not thinking of those centuries when little or nothing was exactly observed and recorded and men existed gaping on fantastic rumour, but of here and now, with all our humming wires and cash registers and books filled with figures. That simple people should believe in the passage across England of that Russian army, the hundred thousand in sheepskin that are the descendants of our old friends, the eleven in buckram, and declare their conviction that Lord Kitchener is still alive and at present in China (having been actually seen there by a man the Vicar's nephew met in Hong Kong), that simple people should believe these things does not surprise me in the least. With all our hundreds of newspapers, we live even yet on rumour and legend, only we call them “things that don’t get into the papers, you know”; and journalists themselves, even though they may be acquainted with real facts that are kept from the public, innocently swap myths by the hour. Indeed, Fleet Street hums with idle rumour and

legends grow there at an incredible pace. The story of my revue has Fleet Street for its setting.

It began a few weeks ago. I was in Fleet Street with a friend whose work is there. "It would be great fun", I remarked, pushing open the swing doors, "to write a high-brow revue". His reply took the form of a question and had nothing to do with revues, at least, not with this revue, but when he had returned with the glasses and we had each taken a pull, he said vaguely, "What was that—a high-brow revue?" "It would be great fun to write one", I repeated. I had not thought of it before, and I have not given it any consideration since, but during the little interval between my first remark and his query I had had about ten ideas, one for an opening scene, one for a ballet, some for sketches. And now that I come to think of it, they were extraordinarily good ideas too; I only wish I could remember what they were. But then I am for ever throwing off ideas and then forgetting all about them. Is it not amazing how we are misjudged? Thus I am commonly supposed to be one of those dullish but strong, reliable, masterful fellows who fasten on to a piece of work like a bulldog, whereas in reality I am a fair specimen of the opposite type, the people who are always brimming with notions, schemes of work, titles of books, ideas of new periodicals, but have very little industry and application. I would rather fill a notebook with titles and synopses of volumes I mean to write (as I have done before to-day) than compose even a few pages of an actual book. There is no need, however, to describe a type that is

familiar to everybody; and if it should be asked why I have been so misjudged, I have the answer ready: it is because my appearance is so deceptive. If I had long hair, neck, hands, bottle shoulders and a sensitive face, I should be immediately recognized for what I am, but as it is, everybody except a few intimate friends is deceived by my appearance, which is itself partly the creation of an old pose. We brilliant but unstable artists are notorious poseurs.

I sketched out these ideas, then, for my friend, and he approved and disapproved and made suggestions, with all that serious concentration upon matters of no importance which one so often achieves in a tavern; and then we parted. Two or three days afterwards, I doubt if I could have remembered what we had been talking about, for the suggested revue, having served its turn in passing half an hour over the wine, had vanished from my head. But I was not to forget it long. Now *Enter Rumour painted full of tongues*. About a week later I met an acquaintance, who remarked, "I hear you're writing a revue. Jolly good idea, a high-brow revue, though I doubt if it will go." I denied the charge, and asked him for the source of his information. He said he could not remember exactly, but that he had heard a word here and there, something too about possible collaborators. Shortly afterwards, an encounter with a friend brought out the question: "How are you getting on with it?" Once more, of course, the revue. Once more I protested that I had no intention of writing such a thing. Clearly he found my denial hard to believe, and suspected that I wished to keep

him in the dark. "Why", he cried, "it's all over the place. You are sketching out the whole thing, writing most of it too, and So-and-so and Such-and-such are doing some of the lyrics. I heard that it was all settled." He looked at me with something like reproach in his eyes. I assured him that nothing had been thought of, let alone settled, that I had not seen So-and-so and Such-and-such for months, that there was not a word of truth in the whole story. I sketched for him the growth of the legend, and he laughed and I laughed, both of us convinced that this monstrous child of Rumour could not flourish any longer.

I soon discovered, however, that these creatures have a vital independent existence of their own, and that occasional exposures to the cold winds of fact will not deprive them of life nor even stop their growth. Only a day or two ago another friend, a man I had not seen for some weeks, suddenly blew our talk to smithereens with a demand to know if I had finished it yet. "It" was not dead then, but as lively as ever. I asked him in return what he knew about it. He knew a great deal, for there is nothing secret about this revue of mine except where I myself am concerned. He told me how I was writing about half the "book", the other half being the work of a number of collaborators, men of my acquaintance whom he named, and that I was also composing all the music. This was a new development, particularly as I had no idea that I was in the habit of composing music or that I was capable of writing even the score of a revue. There are

some, it seems, who have versatility thrust upon them. And now, you may be sure, there is no chance of my forgetting that revue. I am for ever thinking about it. I do not mean that I am thinking how to write it, how to fill in the trombone parts, and so forth. Naturally not, seeing that it has an existence entirely independent of me, growing mysteriously in the night. No, I am simply wondering how it is progressing. What, I ask myself, am I doing now? Am I designing the costumes? Am I drilling the chorus in the ballet? Am I producing the piece myself (and so far as I can see, I am quite capable of it, particularly as I must have nearly finished the music now), or have I arranged for a professional to take charge? What theatre have I secured? What cast have I managed to engage? This last is a matter of great moment, and I await the time when some friend will tell me all their names with a mixed feeling of impatience and anxiety.

It should not be long before I am told all these things, and learn that rehearsals are going forward and the whole revue taking shape on the actual stage. I have no idea yet when the first night will be, but that there will be a first night and that I shall be told all about it, I am confident. It is not easy to go on quietly with one's work and ordinary life at such a time, but obviously I have no alternative, except that I can seek out my friends rather more frequently than usual in order to hear the latest bit of news. The evening will come when one of them will tell me all about the first night, will describe the crowded theatre, the laughter, the applause, the

bouquets for the actresses, the unanimous and repeated calls for the author. I shall learn what a neat little speech I made and what a figure I cut before the curtain ("And damned odd you looked, old man, too, I thought", the friend will exclaim), and finally what the papers said the morning after and how the theatre is now booked for months ahead. Where will the legend fail? Will it never come to an end? It will, and I know exactly how and where cold fact will appear and the golden mists vanish for ever: I did not spend the most impressionable years of my life north of the Trent to no purpose. The legend will break down the moment I stretch out my hand for the fat royalties. I shall not be paid even in fairy gold, turning to withered leaves before the very eyes of my bank manager. The moment I cry, "The money for my revue, please!" will be the moment when the myth will collapse and a thousand voices will assure me that I never wrote a revue.

AUTOLYCUS AGAIN

IT IS true that he could not have arrived at a better moment. We were all sitting in the garden, having just finished tea; my host and I were lighting our pipes, and my hostess and her sister were dreamily adrift in a haze of cigarette smoke, and all round us the garden smouldered and blazed and distantly sank into a delicate mist of colour. He cannot have known a deeper peace or a lovelier setting even in that old Bohemia of the shepherds and the wandering prince where we first met him. But he was still Autolycus, and did not hesitate to shatter the peace and transform the setting into a mere backcloth for himself, and being Autolycus he contrived to do all this without leaving us resentful. We were idle and at ease, in the very mood for marvels so long as they demanded from us nothing more than a lazy wonder, and all this was plain to him. Seeing us sitting there, host and guests, so happily at ease, a common tout or pedlar would have been afraid to disturb us, would have sneaked round to the back door in the hope that the maid he found there would either buy something herself or take a message to us. This was no common pedlar but the great man himself, and so seeing us there in the garden, he did not hesitate a moment but crossed over and looked down upon us, at once masterful and ingratiating. Had we known then who he was, we might have persuaded him to stay a few hours so that we could have heard

his stories of the time when he wore three-pile velvet, and some account of his subsequent adventures; but we were not to know that it was Autolycus himself we were entertaining, and, indeed, to be frank, we never had certain knowledge. Two members of our party doubted his identity even at the very last, but I, who am learned in these matters, was sure of the fellow once all was revealed.

He had discarded the costume that Perdita and Florizel knew, and was dressed like any ordinary crawler from door to door, in a black and white striped suit that was very shabby now and must have been insufferable when it was new, and with a dirty collar and a greasy purple tie. He had a large face that seemed to come bursting out of a little soft hat with a very narrow brim that he wore slightly tilted to one side. Two days before he could have been described as a clean-shaven man. His eyes were small, greedy, twinkling. His coarse flexible mouth opened to show the ruins of an antique kingdom of ivory. Altogether a shabbily jaunty, greasily impudent fellow, whose appearance suggested that he should be waved away at sight. But he had a manner. Arriving in our midst, he set down a large and very decrepit portmanteau, doffed his comical little hat, and then without hesitation poured down upon us a flood of hoarse speech. He would not have troubled us, he said, if he had not been sure that we should be interested in what he had to show us. We saw him there, carrying his bag from door to door, just because he was a poor man, who had had his misfortunes and could not for the moment raise any

capital. This capital he needed to put on to the market what he called "My own discovery and my own make, ladies and gents". It was a wonderful furniture polish. At this point my hostess summoned up sufficient strength of mind to indicate that she was not in need of any furniture polish. He beamed upon her as if she had said exactly what he wanted her to say. "You don't want any furniture polish, lady", he began, "of course you don't want any. And why? Because you've got plenty. I know that, and I wouldn't come round here if I'd nothing better to sell than the kind that you and everybody's got. But I know I've got an article here"—and with incredible rapidity he dived into the bag and produced a bottle—"I've got an article here, made it myself, that you'll never want to be without. It does away with all these other polishes, this does. And I'm not going to ask you to buy without seeing what it does, I'm going to show you what it does if you'll only give a poor man a chance."

Still talking rapidly, he looked about him for an article of furniture that would give him an opportunity of showing what his polish would do, but as the table and chairs in the garden were light cane affairs, he suggested a move indoors, and before we knew where we were, he was actually shepherding us there. Floating on this tide of speech, held by his eye, we found ourselves in the drawing-room. "Now I'm going to prove to you that I've not been wasting my time and yours", he remarked; and after producing a rag, shaking the bottle with a little flourish and wetting the rag with the polish, he

indicated a small mahogany table as if he were about to give it a medal. With the air of a conjurer, he proceeded to polish one leg. You could not say he rubbed it, he merely passed the rag lightly and gracefully over its surface once or twice. This he did in complete silence and consequently with great dramatic effect. Then, still silent, he stepped back and with one bright glance bade us look at his handiwork and deny its beauty if we dare. Certainly, from the result, he might have been a conjurer. Never have I seen a piece of wood shine as that table leg shone then. The ladies exchanged glances, visibly impressed. With the dignity of one who is confident if not proud, who knows his worth and feels that he has been doubted, our visitor picked up his bag and led the way out again. Once more in the open air, he broke silence to say that it was his usual custom to sell only one bottle at each house, his object being to "introduce this marvellous new polish, my own discovery and my own make", to the public, but for once he was prepared to let us have two, including the bottle that he had just used for the trial. "I'm not trying to show you one thing and sell you another", he explained. The price was trumpery, a mere two shillings for each bottle, just to get it on to the market. My hostess promptly bought the two bottles and with equal promptness our friend departed.

He had been gone at least half an hour when we saw that table leg again, only to make a dreadful discovery. Just as it had been brighter than anyone had ever seen it before, now it was duller. Not a

glimmer of light was reflected from its surface. You never saw such a sullen little piece of wood. My host and I began to laugh, but the ladies were alarmed and indignant. They set to work on that leg, trying all kinds of polishes without any success. That leg had had its brief moment of glory and now, it seemed, its lustre had departed for ever. We had been sold, not an honest polish, but two bottles of sinister magic. It was just as if our late visitor had been a baneful fairy. We could not even guess the ingredients of this strange grey liquid, but that it was his own discovery and "his own make" we could well believe. At first the ladies were furious, even annoyed with us for laughing, but gradually the absurdity of it conquered their minds, and soon they were laughing with us. It was not long before the very sight of that table leg and the two innocent-looking bottles set us going again. Then the Vicar's wife arrived, and the moment she saw the bottles she plunged into an indignant story of furniture and enchantment at the Vicarage. We laughed so much during the recital that long before she had reached the end of it, she was laughing herself and the whole room shook with laughter.

We had a vision of our pedlar of polish going through the village and then on to other villages and towns, leaving behind him a trail of table legs and the like that shone brilliantly for ten minutes and then went dull for ever, a trail of his cheating bottles, his corked and labelled liquid disillusion, a trail of staring housewives, first eager, then indignant, and finally dissolving into laughter. From the point of

view of honest commerce, there could hardly be a more inexcusable cheat. Under any reasonable economic system, such a fellow would not be suffered to be at large. But fortunately there are other things in this life besides commerce and reasonable economic systems, and on any scale of values that is not downright inhuman, it is doubtful if our friend Autolycus is not worth a dozen sullen little traders who never cheated anybody out of a halfpenny but also never brought a smile to anybody's face. Do we not pay heavily indeed for excitement and laughter when they are frankly brought to market? Have we not just been told that Harold Lloyd is paid £8000 a week? Autolycus will not make so much these next ten years, and yet I consider him the more subtle comedian, staging as he does his comedies in our very midst and compelling us to join him as minor players. His latest, the Magic Polish, with its decided if fleeting touch of poetry, would—if the papers took to noticing these things—be admitted to be in his best tradition and worthy of sustaining his reputation. So runs the jargon, and perhaps, poor though he may be, he is fortunate in not having to read it, for even yet Autolycus can work without a Press.

Autolycus, a rogue in character
Shall I call the author's like? He does
anazing. Sometimes a fullfrolded
and sometimes frolarding like a
rake for shoppes of their gold.
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SUTCLIFFE AND I

HERBERT SUTCLIFFE has had such streams of printer's ink, frequently of the vilest quality, poured over him of late that I am sure he will not be offended at the little cupful I propose to add to the torrent. I will, however, offer my apologies to this fine cricketer and fellow Yorkshireman, if only because under cover of his name, which will probably lure so many honest cricketers to this page, I am about to write a very egotistical essay. I have chosen him as my stalking-horse because he and I have many things in common. We are about the same age, come from the same part of the world (though we are not acquainted, I regret to say), and have not entirely dissimilar biographies. Thus, we both served in France, first in the ranks and afterwards as officers, and then, when the war was over, we both became professional entertainers of a rather curious kind. He earned his bread by hitting a ball hard with a shaped piece of willow. I decided to earn mine by setting down on paper various odd fancies and thoughts about men and books. Oddly enough, there are several friends of mine who tell me that they dislike his profession, that a man should not play a game for money, though they do not object to my method of earning a living. They do not seem to see that if it is ridiculous that a man should play cricket for money, it is still more ridiculous that a man should air his feelings for money, that a professional

batsman is less absurd than a professional sonneteer. The fact is, of course, that these friends of mine are unjust to Sutcliffe and his fellow professionals because they have not grasped the simple fact that sport and art are similar activities, that none of us, whether we are batsmen or poets, bowlers or essayists, work away in our fields or our studies for the money itself. We bat or write because we have a passion for batting or writing, and only take the money so that the butcher and baker may be paid while we are so happily engaged. "Don't stop", the community says to us, and hands us a cheque now and then so that we have not to quit the cricket pitch or the writing desk in order to seek a livelihood. Indeed, it would not be difficult to turn the tables on these objectors to professional sport and to prove that it is the amateur who is in the weaker ethical position, for while he is playing cricket from May to September it is possible that he is neglecting the estate it is his duty to manage or the business house from which he draws a salary as director.

Both of us, then, have chosen these odd but by no means disreputable means of earning a living. On the score of money, I do not suppose there is much difference between us. But here the likeness ends. Millions bandy his name who have never heard of me. He himself has probably never seen my name, whereas I know all about him and read about him every day all through the summer. If he strains a muscle, the evening papers tell me all about it in great headlines, but if I should die, probably the tiny paragraph giving the news would never reach the eye

of this contemporary and fellow countryman of mine. Do not misunderstand me, however; there is here no touch of bitterness. Not only is his work harder than mine, but he is a better performer. If I sit down, tired, dispirited, to fill these pages, it does not very much matter for I can muddle through somehow. No wickets are scattered in the middle of the second paragraph; no howl of disappointment goes from a vast crowd, to be echoed all over England the next morning; there is, for me, no melancholy walk back to the pavilion. If Sutcliffe were to fumble as badly at the wicket as I have fumbled many a time down a column of writing, his reputation would be sent flying with the bails. I can mistime my strokes and drop catches in page after page, but no one is any the wiser. I have only to tell myself that I will try to do better next time, and have not to show a shamed face to all England and half the Antipodes. Not only must he work under conditions far more trying to the nerves and temper, but he is, as I have said, the better performer. Not for long years, if ever at all, shall I achieve in this prose the grace, the lovely ease, that shines through innings after innings of his. I may pull off a little trick or two before I have done, but such mastery of the medium as he shows is to me only something gleaming on the far horizon, and long before I arrive there, before that distant gleam becomes a full flood of light, I shall probably be a crazy dodderer or dead and forgotten.

Yet these are facts with a double edge. There may be something nerve-racking in the conditions under which he works, but there is something

heartening too. If I send a sentence flying to the boundary, no shout goes up to tell me that twenty thousand of my fellow men have followed the glorious stroke. When I take up my pen, there are for me no friendly slaps on the back, no cries of "Good luck, old man". I work alone, in silence, and often when all is done I cannot say whether it has been well or badly performed. It is true that no howl greets me if I fumble, but then no cheers come my way if I am on top of the bowling; nothing but silence, broken from time to time by little whispers of stilted praise or disapproval. How curious it would be if our conditions of work were changed about! Sutcliffe would have to go on batting, week after week, without a word, let alone a cheer, reaching his ears, until at last, after he had been slogging away for about two years, a little notice would appear in some newspaper saying: "Undoubtedly Sutcliffe is proving himself to be one of the younger batsmen to be reckoned with", or "With these 2500 runs, Sutcliffe is establishing himself as one of our younger cricketers". And these, it must be understood, would be the complimentary notices, and there would be others. Already he probably imagines that nothing could be more nonsensical than some of the criticisms passed upon him, but if this change were brought about, he would soon realize that there are no limits to solemn nonsense. Thus, I remember once bringing out a book of strictly personal essays, in which it was avowedly my intention to write about myself, yet one newspaper chided me for being egotistical and having so many I's to the page. That

newspaper would complain that Sutcliffe used a bat too much during his innings: "We should like Mr. Sutcliffe better as a batsman if he did not make such unnecessary use of the bat". He would also find himself confronted by a crazy difference of opinion. One half the papers would tell him that he did not hit hard enough, the other half that he hits too hard, until at last, like the sensible fellow he is, he would decide to laugh at the whole crew of them.

Meanwhile my own position would be so much more exhilarating that it would be embarrassing. I should wake up one morning and find the country placarded with "Priestley Disappoints" or "Wonderful Essay by Priestley". Now and then the evening papers would come out with special editions: "Priestley's Essay Begun. Latest Reports. Some Good Phrases." Retired essayists, writing long reports every other day or so, would analyse every paragraph, contrast this week's essay with that of a fortnight ago, and comment at length on every change of mood and style. If anything went wrong with me, all the country would be told about it, just as it was when Sutcliffe strained a muscle a short time ago. I can see the placards and headlines: "Priestley Out of Humour. Says in No Mood for Work. May Not Write Essay this Week", and there would probably follow then a long interview with the local wine merchant, who would tell the reporters that I had just bought a bottle of Chambertin so that there was still some chance of my writing after all. There would be warm discussions all over the country, in newspapers clubs, bar parlours, on the

subject of my possible inclusion in the England Essay Team. Everybody would send in lists: Belloc, Lynd, Chesterton, Beerbohm, Lucas, Tomlinson and so forth. In the end I should probably be selected as twelfth man, to wait in the library. Messrs. Belloc and Lynd would probably be sent in first. But I have no intention of discussing the composition of this team: all that I wish to point out is that it would beat Australia in any kind of weather. This is a fact worth remembering, for after all there are other things in the world besides games, and England is not ruined just because sinewy brown men from a distant colony sometimes hit a ball further and oftener than our men do. And I am sure that Sutcliffe, to whom, after such a picture of a life passed in the full glare of public interest, I offer my sympathy, will agree with me, though I hope, for his sake and mine, he will go on gracefully stealing runs, hitting the manful boundary, with more and more power to his elbow.

MIDSUMMER DAY'S DREAM

WHEN I was younger and more adventurous, I was for a time an enthusiastic disciple of those philosophers, like Hegel, who professed a wildly idealistic system of metaphysics. I believed with them that matter had no real existence and that the world was created by thought, and as at that time I lived almost entirely for argument and loved nothing better than an impudent paradox, I had great joy in these beliefs. There is a novel of Mr. E. M. Forster's that opens, and magnificently too, with an undergraduate's philosophical argument—or, if you will, intellectual spree—that turns on the reality of some cows in a field. One side held that the beasts were there all the time whether anyone looked at them or not. The other side declared that the cows really came into existence when you poked your head over the wall. I spent many a flushed and happy night arguing those cows into existence by poking my head over that imaginary wall. Many an evening, too, rushed joyously towards the small hours, through an appropriate Teutonic atmosphere of beer and tobacco, while I confronted simpler (but probably wiser) youths with those posers about appearance and reality, those paradoxes about the higher freedom, that I can no more call to mind now than I can the card tricks of an earlier and perhaps less insufferable stage of my existence. I do not argue about metaphysics now, and if I did I should not

take that side of the question. But there are times even now when my state of mind surpasses that of the most romantic idealistic philosophers, when my point of view is not unlike that of those Indians who sit in the jungle contemplating eternal truths and hold that all external life is nothing but the idlest of dreams.

Curiously enough, it is just when my conditions of life most nearly approach those of the Indian philosophers that I draw near to their attitude of mind. During that short time when high midsummer descends upon us and we are for once in a while drenched in nothing but sunshine, I lose my hold upon reality. The last few days have brought midsummer to this part of the country, mornings of triumphant blue and gold, afternoons that are a shimmer of heat, and evenings like bronze, and once more I have moved through them like a man in a vague dream. I cannot imagine why this should be, unless it is the mere unfamiliarity of this bright baked earth and blue vault that spread themselves before me. There would seem to be some excuse for a man who believes that the world is a mere illusion during those long seasons of mist and rain, when spectral hills are framed in the blurred window panes, when field and road and tree are merged into one grey shadow show; but at such times I lose no jot of my confidence in the reality of this life and I walk upon the solid earth as one of its creatures. On the other hand, there is every reason to think that this flood of sunlight, which gives everything a hard bright edge and makes the world look like a

new paint-box, would make it impossible for any man to escape from the conviction that things outside him are unflinchingly real; yet it seems to be this very sunlight that conjures away reality for me and turns everything back again into an illusion.

It is not that I feel that I alone am real. Other people are not part of the dream, but even they are touched with fantasy, for though they still remain their solid and companionable selves, they seem to be taking part in some kind of open-air theatrical entertainment. As I see them in the full sunshine, bright figures crossing the lawn or standing out against a blaze of flowers, they are not quite their usual selves and I have a feeling that there is a fancy-dress garden party in progress. The women lounging in white, the men in their flannels, the children flickering round the rose bushes or strawberry beds, all are comically familiar yet unfamiliar, as if they had dressed up for some fantastic occasion of which I had been kept in ignorance. This does not mean that I like them less, for actually I think I like them more than ever I did. At least, I admire them more than ever, though they make me feel a little shy and strange. I am there, too, in the pageant, but as I cannot see myself, I feel out of it, as if they had all bedizened themselves for a party to which I had not been invited. As I look at them, the old touched with a new dignity in the sunlight and the young all radiant and strangely charming or even beautiful, I can just dimly imagine what feelings must possess the husband of an actress who goes to the theatre and sees his wife on the stage in some unfamiliar

bravery of hoop and powdered hair or bonnet and crinoline, so familiar in every glance and tone of voice and turn of the head, and yet so troublingly unfamiliar as she passes and repasses before him in her new guise, smiling out of a lost world. Only a shadow of his emotion falls across my mind, but it is there as I move among these midsummer friends of mine.

It is, however, the background against which we all play our parts, the whole colossal show of things, that really fills these hours with the haze of illusion. For at least three days now I have walked and talked and played in unreality. Nothing could be more beautiful than the garden is now, with its enchanted tangle of roses beyond the shining lawns, its happy mist of delphiniums and lupins and distant scarlet riot of poppies, its mingled glitter and shadow of foliage; and nothing could have less actuality. Breathlessly I admire, but I do not, so to speak, believe a word of it. At any moment—hey presto!—it may be gone. All this beauty of gold-green lawns and smouldering blossoms is as brittle as glass. As I lounge the afternoon away in a deck-chair, bound for the happy isles of China Tea and Cucumber Sandwiches, and stare at the scene before me, it does not seem to have any solidity at all and I feel that if I were so evilly-minded I could poke a finger through it. Some idle and mischievous demi-god could easily roll it all up and then there would be disclosed the familiar sight of grass and leaves, just ordinary solid grass and leaves that gardeners have to cut and trim and wheel away in barrows. It is all

a marvellous piece of hocus-pocus or, if you will, a divinely devised entertainment, hastily though miraculously put together quite regardless of cost, but here to-day and gone to-morrow. It is dangerous even closing the eyes, let us say for half an hour's meditation in the middle of the afternoon, for when they are open again the whole pageant may have vanished, the entire glamourie of light and colour and scent whisked away and nothing remaining but common daylight in the old grey place and somewhere, invisible, a Prospero with a broken wand.

As for the village outside, it only makes a droll pretence of being real. As soon as you open the big gate, which is made of wood and too high to be seen over, it merely assembles a few backcloths, very bright and newly-painted things showing pinky-grey walls and wavy roofs, a few dim interiors, a sleeping cat or dog or two, a glimpse of meadows starry in white and gold, and some dazzling roads going off into green and blue distance, and then rapidly drapes them round you as you walk through. Even the most foolish staring materialist would not be taken in by it. As I crept out this morning, the third of this midsummer illusion, I thought it might be tired and hoped to take it by surprise, but the whole scene was ready for me and the village school had even been given an imitation solid front, a fairly expensive "set" this, and a noise cunningly mimicking the sound of children singing sol-fa was coming from it, probably to remind me of my own childhood. The vicar was there too, in a white coat and fussing away with a brand-new car. But even with the sol-fa

and the vicar—clever devices both; I raise my hat to them—the scene had no more actuality than before, and never for a moment did I believe that it was anything more than one vast day-dream. I walked alone among idle and fleeting phenomena. Some mind, if not my own then one akin to mine, has hung all these lovely and diaphanous tapestries for a brief season in the hall of life, where only spirits congregate, and while this high noon of the year broods over us we can escape the tyranny of mere things, the pressing thumb of grim old reality, who will leap to life again with the wind and the rain. While this midsummer lasts, we can, if we are lucky, make the best of two very different worlds: we can be as serenely detached from things as Indian philosophers buried away in the jungle, and yet as happily wondering as children at a pantomime.

CALLING ON THE VICAR

IT WAS my cousin who took this furnished cottage for me, and as she herself is a resident here no doubt she feels responsible for me. Living as she does in that fine old house at the other end of the village—and you can see that house keeping its eye on the place—no doubt she has a position to keep up. I have no wish to be one of her trials; I like my cottage and I am grateful to her for installing me in it so promptly, also for the many admirable lunches and dinners she spreads before a lonely man. Nevertheless I maintain that it is absurd of her to imagine that a furnished cottager like myself has any social obligations, that he is anything but a bird of passage. It is true that the vicar called upon me when I happened to be out the other afternoon, for not only did I find his card but also his pamphlet on the local church, reprinted from the transactions of the Blankshire Archaeological Society and delivered with the author's compliments. That pamphlet showed that he meant business, my cousin said, and she ought to know because she has more than a passing acquaintance with it. But I cannot see why she should have insisted upon taking me to pay a formal call upon him. I was of course a fool to mention that he had left his card, but a man grows careless after a good lunch and is apt to forget that the hostess who puts before him such capital cold duck and salad will not necessarily see eye to eye with him in all things.

It was not that I had any objection to making the vicar's acquaintance. There are some Church of England clergymen I dislike intensely at sight, particularly those that are either too effeminate, the mincing heroes of the sewing tea, or are too terrifically manly and always roar with laughter, over an aggressive there-on-principle pipe, at every remark that is made. But the majority of them fall between these two extremes and may be considered very decent fellows. They have their weaknesses, of course, and I for one do not like their habit of chasing very small sins down side streets at a time when Juggernaut itself is thundering down the main road ; or their trick of grumbling at their parishioners, at the men for striking and at the girls for preferring dances to domestic service, before they have made any serious attempt to understand their people's point of view. For most of them, however, I have a genuine sympathy. They seem to exist now in an unhappy mid-air, for they cannot stalk abroad any longer with hell fire at their command, having the right to intervene in any man's business, nor can they merely shrug their shoulders and stand aside. The result is that they generally appear a little wistful and apologetic and go tip-toeing in and out of social life, feeling that it is still their duty to be everywhere but never certain that they are wanted. I am ready to go two-thirds of the way to meet men so unhappily situated, and offer no objection if they rain pamphlets upon me and talk rood screens until the small hours.

No, what I objected to was paying a formal call

that afternoon. It was a very hot afternoon, and one obviously designed for meditation in the garden, for the duty of turning that cold duck and salad into so many profound thoughts and beautiful fancies. But my cousin insisted, pointing out, too, that the vicarage was only a step and that the call would not last long. Then as soon as I gave in, the unscrupulous woman demanded that I should return to my cottage and change my clothes. Disreputable flannels, not fit to be seen even in a corner of the garden, were clearly impossible for a call at the vicarage. She would never dream of being seen with me in such awful clothes. I pointed out that there was no reason why she should be seen with me, that the whole business was an absurdity. I saw myself trudging the length of the village, shedding these comfortable old clothes, putting on some ridiculous suit, wrestling with a collar, sweating back to the house for her, going to the vicarage, and then being compelled to change again in order to be comfortable for the rest of the day. I attacked the whole hollow sham of the social order; I bitterly contrasted its empty formalities, its puerile vanities, with the truly philosophic life (involving old flannels and a chair in the garden); Carlyle himself could not have done better. To all this she paid no attention whatever, merely remarking that she had seen me a few days before in a dark blue suit that had at least some pretensions to decency, and that I had just time to put it on. By a few artful feminine comments on my appearance, and with the assistance of an attitude of amused and indulgent maternity,

she had, of course, reduced me by this time to a sulky little boy with no hold at all on the truly philosophic life.

It was monstrous, but of course I had to go, to trudge, change, wrestle with collar, come creaking and perspiring back again—in short, to turn the lovely afternoon into a nightmare of futility and discomfort. It is this kind of thing that makes a man turn an ironic ear to the wails of the feminists. There is no man on earth who could have compelled me to go through that absurd routine. But my cousin had her own way in this as she does in everything. I never remember her when she was not having her own way. It will be said that there are numbers of men too who always contrive to have their own way, but I must confess that I have not met many of them, whereas I know dozens of women like my cousin. It will also be said that men do at least gain their ends in the big things of this life, but even if that is true—and I doubt it—I think I would rather assert myself in a thousand little tussles than have to wait ten years or so for a crisis before my decision gained the day. The memory of the other afternoon has ruined for me many a pathetic appeal. The novelist or the dramatist will tell me that she sacrificed herself for him, but instead of gaping in admiration, I shall wonder if, having made her sacrifice, she compelled him to change his clothes and trot after her on a hot afternoon.

Having done as I was told, I was no longer the sulky little boy but the nice little boy, smart in his best suit, and so my cousin was as smooth as cream

when I rejoined her and we strolled towards the vicarage. I was told how pleased the vicar would be to make a new acquaintance, how lonely it was for him there with so few men he could really talk to, how deeply read he was in history and kindred subjects, until at last a faint glow of virtue began to steal through me. As we walked down the drive and made remarks about the garden, I was amused to notice that a shade of formality was creeping into our cousinly exchanges. We were beginning to create another atmosphere; a tiny rehearsal of the call was in progress; so that by the time we had reached the door all reality had vanished from our talk, which had become the patter of mere acquaintances. The door was closed; the whole house had a shuttered look. "Perhaps he's out", my cousin whispered; and I had a vision of him toiling through the hot afternoon, perhaps on some errand of mercy, on a warm and dusty bicycle. I determined then to repeat the call at the first opportunity, for the least an idler could do was to cheer such a man in his few hours of ease. Almost did I feel ashamed to think of the fuss I had made about a mere changing of clothes. Why should the great fabric of social life be torn merely because I wanted to idle away an afternoon in the garden? I rang the bell and prepared a smile and a phrase or two.

A ruddy spectacled face gaped round the door at us. My cousin inquired if the vicar was at home. The maid, like most country maids, was very formal for about half a minute, and then lapsed into complete informality. No, the vicar was not at home.

As a matter of fact—and here she lowered her voice—he was resting. Should she disturb him? My cousin very sweetly waved the suggestion away and handed some cards to her. Then, very slowly and without a word, we walked back along the drive. It was very hot, hotter than ever, and I looked down at my trousers. At this very moment the vicar had probably escaped trousers altogether. I imagined him sprawling there, behind drawn blinds, without his trousers. Then my cousin, still in the calling atmosphere, turned to me with some inane bright remark, but the sight of my face immediately dissipated that atmosphere to smithereens, and she suddenly began laughing. I returned to the cottage and changed into the very oldest clothes I could find.

DIFFERENT INSIDE

I HAVE been misunderstood and wrongly accused so many times that I ought to be able now to shrug my shoulders, not merely suffering in silence (for I know that protest is useless) but being indifferent, not suffering at all. Yet every other day or so something happens and I see once more what an ill-fated fellow I am. Only last night, for example, when we were playing bridge at my cousin's, she accused me of being far too pleased with myself when I contrived (not unskilfully, let me admit) to be four up in Spades. The fact is, of course, that she was still rather annoyed because she had for once been over-called, she who calls so wildly and unscrupulously and always forgets to pay, or at least forgets to pay me, when she loses. That is not the point, however, and I have no intention of discussing my cousin's fantastic ethics. The trouble is that I know very well she had evidence enough on which to base her accusation. No doubt my face was one vast ill-mannered grin of triumph, a revolting sight, and yet I was not feeling jubilant, ready to crow at my victory, but only mildly pleased with myself. I did not even know I was looking pleased, having forgotten for the moment the tricks my face plays on me. I can well believe, however, that I presented to the company a front that irritated everybody. Are other people, I wonder, as plagued by their faces as I am by mine, which thus monstrously exaggerates

and distorts every feeling it is called upon to express; or do I suffer alone—a man with a calm philosophic mind but with a face that long ago decided to go on the stage, and the melodramatic stage at that, a man with his heart in the right place but with his features in Hollywood?

When I first entered adult life I imagined, like the young idiot I then was, that I had complete control of my face. I was convinced that I could permit myself to feel anything behind that bland disguise. When I went out for the evening and found myself becoming more and more bored by the company, I was sure that nobody but myself was aware of the fact. I set my face, as best I could from behind, to register a polite or even eager interest; I put on a smile and kept it there, left my eyes to sparkle away, and so forth; and then felt, even though the smile seemed rather stiff towards the end of the evening, that I could relapse with safety into comfortable boredom. As I never saw myself, it was some time before I was disillusioned. We never lose any of our illusions about ourselves in the company of strangers. But I made friends, and in this, as in other matters, they very quickly disillusioned me as they strolled, in the usual friendly fashion, through the house of my mind and casually opened a few windows here and there to let in the east wind. One would say: "Dullish at the So-and-so's the other night, I thought. You looked dreadfully bored". A succession of such remarks soon revealed to me the true state of things, and I realized that I had been deceiving myself. It was not for me to try to look

one thing when I was thinking and feeling another. The idea of myself as one of your smooth fellows, made for diplomacy and the best society, for ever charming yet secretly tired of it all, would no longer hold, and, bearing in mind my newer and truer relations with my face, I was compelled to revise my estimate of myself.

There was, however, nothing alarming or even really disappointing in the situation. I was not sorry to be free from the strain of a diplomatic bearing, and congratulated myself on the fact that the higher types of human beings do not wear a smooth and impassive front. There is nothing better than an open, honest countenance, frankly expressing to the world its owner's feelings. I thought so then and I think so still, though now my opinion is worth more if only because it is more disinterested. I imagined then that mine was one of those open, honest faces, and was happy in this belief until the cumulative effect of a series of misunderstandings, of which that one last night is a good example, compelled me to take stock of myself once more, with the result that I was disillusioned once and for all. I found that people were always telling me not to be so angry when, in actual fact, I was only slightly annoyed, were for ever asking me why I was so jubilant when in truth I was only mildly pleased, were constantly suggesting that I should not glare furiously at strangers when I was only conscious of feeling a little curious. At last I realized the truth. My face did not even honestly reflect my mind but grossly caricatured it. I was carrying into all companies a

monstrous libel of myself. It was as if I were compelled to wear a set of features that did not belong to me at all but to some other and very different kind of man. Small wonder, then, that I should be so frequently misjudged, for it is not unnatural that people should imagine that these facial antics, for which I am held responsible though they seem to be entirely beyond my control, are an indication of my state of mind. How are they to know that my face has apparently an independent existence, setting to work merely on a hint from my mind and then going on in a fashion of which I strongly disapprove.

That is the irony of the situation. My face would seem to belong to a type of man I dislike. It is a theatrical, temperamental affair, for ever rushing out to extremes, whereas I am all for moderation. I do not pretend to absolute philosophic calm and detachment, but—whatever my acquaintances, the deluded audience of this face, may say to the contrary—I am certainly not a man of strong feelings, one of those people who must be excited about something, who are not happy unless they are in the depths of misery or find all existence wretched because they do not feel ecstatic, who must be always yearning and burning, loving and hating, laughing and crying. Not only have I a contempt for such persons, but I could not imitate them if I would. Such emotions as I have are small and safe and never likely to get out of hand. Ecstasy and despair do not come my way and are never likely to be encountered in the easy rambles that my mind takes every day. My attitude towards my fellow creatures is one of

timid goodwill, tempered here by tranquil affection and there by a faint hostility. Even the kind of man who ought, at this moment, to be wearing my face only arouses a dislike that stops very far short of definite hatred. When, let us say (for last night still rankles), I win a game, I am only conscious of feeling a slight pleasure, spiced by just the slightest sense of triumph; and when I lose, as I do very frequently, I am certain that I am visited by nothing stronger than a tiny feeling of disappointment, a mere mental sigh. I have been guilty, in my time, of some meannesses and may have contrived, here and there, to do a kindness, but never yet have I played either the villain or the hero. If life is a melodrama—and sometimes it has every appearance of being one—then I am certainly a very minor character. In short, I am a well-fed, comfortable, calm and not entirely unphilosophical adult male, with no desire for raging emotions and with precious few to rage.

That is what I am really like inside. Outside, apparently, everything is different, thanks to a set of features that totally misrepresent me. So far as I can gather, my face pounces on the least whisper in my mind, as it were, and transforms it into a shout. It grins insolently and sickeningly with triumph over a mere hand at cards. It scowls ferociously at inoffensive strangers, screams "You're a bore!" at prattling callers, and twists and writhes, lights up or fades out, falls into a sodden mass of depression, glitters with mischief, gapes or grins or glares, at every fresh turn the conversation takes. It

transforms every hour into a benefit performance by a bad actor of the old school, strutting and mouthing insanely in the limelight. A talking ape with a megaphone could not produce a worse caricature of its master. While the company I am in is staring at this monstrous show, I sit there innocently behind it all, an unassuming fellow with nothing but a pleasant little rise and fall of emotion, entirely forgetting that this awful travesty of my mind is taking place until some strange misunderstanding bids me remember how grotesquely and unhappily I am situated. Am I alone in my trouble or has there been a general misdeal of faces? Perhaps there are other unfortunates for whom the situation has been reversed, who find themselves possessed of the most towering emotions, yet cannot make their passion felt because their faces refuse to express anything beyond a slight feeling of annoyance or a tranquil pleasure. If there are any such persons, I should like to meet one of them for the purpose of comparing our baffled sensations and of finally forming and consolidating a friendship. We could at least enjoy one another's faces.

THE PESSIMISTS

THEY burst in upon me last Sunday morning, these two young men—we will call them A. and B. They came striding through the clear sunlight, in which there was already a faint suggestion of autumn, a touch of her cool forefinger, and descended upon me like the demigods or heroes they are, dusty and roaring and red-faced and clamorous for beer. Within a second or two my cottage was crowded with their sprawling legs and gesticulating arms. I had been spending the morning, laying down one after another of its exquisite pale gold pieces, in meditating a few pages of fine writing, something spun out of a reverie over that first autumnal whisper. It was already taking shape in my mind, a whimsical, melancholy, deckle-edged affair, the very matter for numbered and signed copies. There is something curiously depressing about late August, when the world is dusty and blown and fretful. Summer has gone, dragging her roses off the stage, and there is an interval of waiting, during which we yawn over our programmes, before the lights turn golden and misty for the pomp of autumn. I was beginning to feel depressed myself and that was why I decided to attempt some fine writing, there being no better cure for this malady, itself mostly a literary affair, than a whole-hearted literary debauch, in which armfuls of gorgeous adjectives are scattered like largesse.

But the entrance of my two young friends put an end to that, and what with the cares of hospitality and the roaring sea of their companionship, on which I soon found myself adrift, I said good-bye to my tender melancholy and fine phrases.

I call these guests "my two young friends" as if there were whole generations between us, whereas a really elderly person, casually surveying us, would lump us all together as contemporaries. We are not, however, and the difference is significant. They are post-war (one of them is still up at his university and the other has not been down long) and I am not, and very often they contrive to make me feel as old as I frequently try to appear in my more responsible compositions. Last Sunday they were in magnificent form. They had been walking all Saturday, and had managed to cover an odd ten or twelve miles that very morning. They bellowed their news and stretched themselves in my sitting-room, sang and splashed in the bathroom, and then came down to put away the lunch of six. My bottled beer went winking down their throats. My coffee disappeared between two epigrams. They filled their youthful and aggressive pipes, blew out great blue clouds of old matured Virginia and young raw satisfaction, and then accompanied me into the garden, where we lounged and smoked through the afternoon. We watched the sunlight fall upon the ripening pears. Across the lawn, the seven-foot hollyhocks stood like girlish grenadiers. The poppies blazed among the distant weeds. From somewhere close but mysterious there came a murmuring of

doves, and far away an old bell jangled faintly. The afternoon went rustling by in blue and white. Well-fed, glowing, their strong young limbs outstretched, my guests leaned back, and after smoking idly for some time with half-closed eyes, at last began to talk. The moment was ripe for a symposium, and Epicurus himself would not have disdained the situation. Naturally enough, they grew philosophical.

Objecting to some timid remark of mine, A. pointed out that all our efforts are probably futile. His companion loudly and cheerfully agreed, and together, with raised voices, they hunted down man's foolish strivings and little sentimentalisms, hallooing as they went. Their sparkling eyes saw inward visions of this life as a desert, marked only by the whitening bones of wasted effort. They roared together over our pitiful illusions. Politics and art and religion and love were whirled away on gusts of laughter. Our whole civilization might perish at any moment, if, indeed, it was not perishing already. Gleefully, their faces alight, they pointed out to one another the unmistakable signs of this collapse, and upon me they rained evidence. They kicked out in ecstasy as flaw after flaw was discovered in this structure of ours. But now there arrived a difference of opinion between them, which resulted in the jolliest argument imaginable and all the pointing with pipe stems and the frequent striking of matches that accompany such jolly arguments. B. emphatically declared that the sooner this civilization was nothing more than a memory,

the better it would be for all of us. A. was positive that it was doomed, but thought we had probably made a mistake in letting it go, if only because our next state would be immeasurably worse. For this he was heartily chaffed by B., who said that he would not have suspected his friend of such obvious sentimentalism. Then they both began to examine the situation more closely, making fewer concessions to mere human weakness and broadening the base of the discussion, so that by the time we had sat down to tea they were in full flight.

"The fact is, of course", cried A., dealing heartily with his fifth sandwich, "the universe is entirely indifferent to any of our concerns. A minor planet goes rotten and begins to breed all kinds of queer creatures, and after a time these creatures have the impudence to imagine that their affairs are important, that what they want is what the universe wants. As a matter of fact, though, that's wrong because the universe doesn't want anything. It will just grind away till it stops, and we might as well recognize the fact. We can make up our minds that the whole show will be blotted out sooner or later —and, on the whole, a jolly good thing, too! What do you say, B.?" And he beamed at us, and passed his cup for the third time. "I don't mind how weak it is", he remarked. "I'm still thirsty enough for anything."

B. cut himself a hearty chunk of cake and patted it lovingly. "I don't agree with you", he began. "You're nothing but an old materialist. You're years out of date, you and your mechanical universel

I don't mind telling you, too, that you're a jolly sight too optimistic. The universe is alive all right and knows what's going on here. But why?"—” And here he paused and A. reached out for a cigarette. “To make an unholy mess of it, of course. The old idea was right all the time. We're just a droll spectacle for the gods. If there's a supreme deity, then you may depend upon it, he's probably a sadist.”

A. considered this view and clearly found it attractive, but was compelled, perhaps a trifle reluctantly, to reject it. He went on to draw a picture of man, doomed to perish with all his little notions of beauty and goodness, standing erect, his head lifted to the pitiless stars; and so warmed to the task that he quite forgot to finish his tea and keep his cigarette alight. Dancing with impatience, B. finally cut in with his own view of things, and showed us this life of ours as a tragedy of marionettes, with a dominating principle of evil, a malicious and omnipotent power, pulling the strings. We were allowed to develop so that our capacity for suffering might be increased. His companion declared that this view was far more rosy and sentimental than his, because “people would rather have an evil spirit than none at all”. B., on his side, humorously incensed at the notion that he was at the old trick of pandering to human weakness in his revelation of truth, waved away what he called “this pleasant little idea of the machine universe”, and added more crimson and black to his own picture of things. The cottage resounded with the flushed and

eager pair of them, but the talk had gone little further before it was time for them to be off, for they were catching the 6.25 back to town, to end their happy week-end jaunt with a pleasant little dinner somewhere.

I was genuinely sorry when they departed, roaring down the road in farewell, for bereft of their high spirits the cottage seemed vacant, lifeless. It is really these evenings in late August that make the season, or brief interlude between seasons, so depressing. The long daylight has dwindled, but yet it is too early to light lamps and draw curtains. Fires are not to be thought of, yet there is a chill in the air. It is the drear little interval between the two magics of summer and autumn. Its long pallid face stares in at the casement, whispering that something is ending for ever. The sky looks like the window of an empty house. In this light, dimming to a dusk without warmth and kindness, Tchehov's people chatter quietly and break their hearts. By the time the owls were hooting round the eaves and the room was ghostly with moths, I was more depressed than usual at such an hour and was sorry that I had not pressed my friends to stay or gone up to town with them, laughing and chattering away, on the 6.25. I saw them, in a wistful vision, sitting down to that pleasant little dinner, rubbing their hands, ruddy and bright of eye, preparing to round off the day and then march happily on towards the new morning.

FIRST NIGHTS

THERE have been so many new plays produced lately, sometimes two or even three on the same evening, that editors of daily papers have had to employ extra dramatic critics. Among these editors is a friend of mine, whose newspaper is one of the very few remaining on earth that it is possible still to read and to admire; and a few weeks ago he suggested that I should turn dramatic critic two or three nights a week. I was only too willing, for I like the theatre and still discover a peculiar delight in going there without paying; and there would be some fun and a little money, I thought, in being an occasional dramatic critic. But I have now decided to give it up, for there is no fun and not enough money. I have no quarrel with the theatre itself, which I shall continue to visit at least once a week, as I have always done, when I am in town. I do not very much mind writing the notices, even though it is a nuisance having to rush away to Fleet Street to scribble for half an hour when every one else has gone comfortably home. It is true that most new plays seem to be extraordinarily bad, much worse than I, who have done my theatre-going in the past with my own selection of drama, ever imagined plays could be. But what I really object to is the whole first-night business. I have learned many things from my experience of these last few weeks.

I have known many dramatic critics, admired

them, liked them, but one characteristic they all had in common, however different they might be as private persons, had always puzzled me. This was a kind of slightly peevish haughtiness about them, a touch of your Coriolanus. The best fellows in the world, it may be, over a glass and a pipe, yet their attitude in general seemed stained with misanthropy. They carried with them an air of proud melancholy, as if they were men who had been called to a perilous destiny, who had passed through ordeals of which we common mortals knew nothing. When we suggested that theirs was the fattest and softest job in journalism, they returned a hollow laugh. They came among us like captains of front-line troops returning to the base. This attitude seemed to me very puzzling. I saw them, at least in imagination, earning an easy living by sitting every night in velvet stalls, wielding more obvious power than any other kind of critic, being regarded with awe by charming actresses, putting conceited actors in their place, entering the theatre like Fate itself. Whence come, I asked myself, this peevishness, this speck of misanthropy, this hollow laugh? Is it because the world has been made too easy for them, because they have long forgotten the common lot of men, and so have arrived at a sad satiety and are now too ripe, nearly rotten, in the sunshine of fortune? Is this hint of dark knowledge, of secret ordeals, a piece of make-believe, an infection of the stage? And so I never met a dramatic critic, or rarely read a column of his criticism, without pestering myself with these queries.

Now I understand. Ceaseless first-nighting is

responsible for all the trouble. You and I, to-night, have the choice of doing one of twenty delightful things: we can sit quietly by the fire all the evening with a book; we can ask in our friends or go to visit them; we can play bridge or billiards or chess or ping-pong; we can listen to music, roam about the streets or country lanes, put up and paint shelves, look in at the club, drink and smoke and stretch and yawn and, if all else fails, go to bed. But what are the wretched dramatic critics doing with themselves this evening? They are going to a first night. Most of their evenings are passed at first nights. Most of their fellow creatures with whom they come into contact, at the hour, mark you, when we are seeking out our friends, are first-nighters. They begin to see humanity as something that nods and smirks and chatters over a free programme, then gapes and claps and boos. Night after night, when they might be reading *Lord Jim* or calling three no trumps, they enter the same atmosphere, sink wearily into their stalls, go out between the acts to see the same old gang at the same old antics in the foyer. Small wonder that on occasion they should play Timon on the beached verge. The marvel is that they are not worse than they are, for they are for ever seeing human nature at its silliest.

But surely, I hope I hear someone saying (for I have no wish to have a monopoly of innocence), this is to libel a social function of some importance. Have we not heard and read of those splendid evenings at the theatre, when all the intellect and beauty and wit of London were to be seen in the

stalls, when one famous man and one beautiful woman after another took their places and the pit had had a magnificent four-shillingsworth long before the play began? Those, I fear, are the first nights of fiction, and only of fiction. In novels every first night is a glittering spectacle, a memorable experience, just as every play performed on such nights is a colossal success. As soon as the theatre comes into fiction, the novelist parts company with reality altogether and becomes once more a weaver of fairy tales. Everywhere celebrities, beauty, wit, diamonds, bouquets, floods of champagne; a new masterpiece by an unknown author on the stage, players of genius, thunders of applause, speeches, tears, laughter, kisses; the dress circle a mass of split gloves; pit and gallery hoarse; the critics, their collars limp rags, waving their fountain-pens; an evening to be remembered for ever. This is the first night of fiction. And I, like a fool, believed that actual first nights, even when all allowances had been made for the rich colouring of the novelist's art, were something like this, and that, as a dramatic critic, I should have at least one or two memorable evenings a week. I have had them, idiocy being as easily remembered as anything else, and if I am to preserve my faith in my fellow creatures it will be as well if I do not have any more.

It is difficult to say exactly why people at first nights should seem so silly. I am not prejudiced, I think: no play of mine has as yet come before them to make them my enemies for ever. But the fact remains that I have never yet formed a lower opinion

of a company of persons than I have of the first-night audiences I have seen. Of the people in the pit and gallery I can say little, beyond that they will applaud any mortal thing, miss all the finer points (when there are any), and laugh in the wrong places. Of the people in the dress circle and stalls I could say a great deal, but will restrain myself. For all I know to the contrary, there may be any number of celebrities among them, for there are very few celebrities known to me even by sight; but if there are, then our famous men and women are a queer set. As to beauty, I never in my life saw less of it. Women in general, as they become scraggier and more closely cropped, begin to look less and less attractive in the evening, and the more trouble they take the worse the result; but for some curious reason the women who attend first nights are uglier than their sisters, and contrive to combine in their persons all that is most objectionable in the sticky-mouthed death's head and be-satined raw bones that we call our woman of fashion. Looking about him on these occasions, a man almost comes to believe in the strange creatures that pass for female characters in so many of the plays themselves.

For the rest, excluding journalists and other persons who are there because it is their living, these first-nighters can be divided into three classes, all equally objectionable. There are first the people, perhaps friends of the author or the players, who are there to applaud everything. They clap when the curtain rises to disclose the usual monstrous drawing-room, and they clap again when the inevitable butler

answers the inevitable telephone. Then there are the persons who are there to see their acquaintances or the mysterious celebrities, and so spend all their time craning their necks this way and that and whispering and nudging one another. Then, again, there are the persons, out-of-work actors and actresses and the like, who are there to be seen, and so stand up for about five minutes, bowing and smiling at nobody in particular, before they take their seats, make a tremendous fuss about going in and out, and talk at the top of their voices in the foyer. So much for our first-nighters. And now, it only remains for one of those inhumanly reasonable persons to point out that I myself and such friends of mine as attend these functions, sulky-looking men who sprawl in their seats but always contrive to be first in the bar at the intervals, may be equally objectionable to the people I have pilloried. I have no doubt we are, but one of us, myself, is about to remedy the matter by staying away. And if ever I have a play produced, it will begin with a second night.

A VOLUNTARY EXILE

THERE are many reasons why the news about my friend Runnerman, the short-story writer, should be so annoying. I call him my friend, although we have not met these many months and never did meet frequently, because we have no term that would indicate our exact relationship. We were warmer than acquaintances, but had not reached, perhaps never would have reached, the intimacy of real friendship. When we did meet, which was rarely by design, I think we were always both glad to see one another, and always we settled down to a good ding-dong exchange of news and views. We liked one another's work, too, at least I liked his, particularly those richly concrete stories in which a full glowing imagination brooded over an immense host of facts, stories of the English countryside, of ploughboys and tramps, that will yet give Runnerman (but that is not his name, of course) his niche. And now I hear that he is leaving his tiny cottage in the heart of an English wood (where many a tramp has found a night's lodging and paid for it with a strange tale or even an odd image), and not even leaving it for London, though that would be bad enough, but leaving it for the Continent, and for Vienna of all places. Runnerman living in Vienna! I know no one more English, and hardly anyone whose work is more native to this soil. The farther he moves away from the lanes and meadows and

woods of Berkshire and Oxfordshire the weaker his stories always are, and the few he wrote during that short Italian holiday of his were, in my opinion, downright drivel. And now the man must go and live in Vienna!

I shall miss him, of course, and that counts for something in my annoyance. I shall regret the absence of his dark vivid face, wonderfully alight when he came to mention a good short story or poem he had just read or some incident in his woodland life, perhaps a tree crammed with starlings on a foggy morning, at which times he had a trick of rubbing his head in ecstasy. It is true, too, that I am always a little annoyed if ever I hear of anyone going anywhere when it involves a fine long journey, but that is merely because I want to be off too and am envious at the thought of other people catching gigantic expresses or lounging on the boat-deck. But my annoyance remains even when this regret and this touch of envy have been taken into consideration. I mistrust this practice, now so general among literary people, of voluntary exile. If writers are commanded, by the police or the doctor, to leave this country, there is no help for it! that is their misfortune. Those who exile themselves, however, merely to escape the income tax, to find a cheap villa and a little extra sunshine, or to acquire a cosmopolitan air, are making a colossal mistake, unless they are the kind of writers who are born for cosmopolitanism and produce books that seem to have been written in and for hotel lounges. Some of these exiles, unlike Runnerman, we can very well

spare, reserving our sympathy for the Parisian quarter or Italian village horribly destined to receive them. That the others should act in this witless fashion is a little tragedy. They do not seem to realize that the best books are always written at home, that the writer should be the last of all people to sever his roots.

It is not the going abroad, for a glance or two at an alien life, but the living abroad that works the mischief. The real exile, with a hunger in his heart, may write more beautifully than ever he did at home, seeing the life he has lost as an old man sometimes sees his youth, something far away and glamorous yet wonderfully clear. Literature can be well served even by nostalgia, for passionate desire and dream are there. It can only be served very dubiously, however, by a mere feeling of pleasure at having dodged the income-tax inspector or at having found a very cheap sunny villa. The voluntary exile, unless he should be one of those very exceptional persons who find their own souls only in a foreign land, is in an absurd position. He is merely a tourist who is lingering on. It is true that some glorious things, to be found in the works of Shelley, Byron, Browning, for example, have been written by exiles, though few of these, strictly speaking, were voluntary exiles, having strong reasons for absenting themselves. Even so, I take leave to wonder if their work would not have been even better if they had remained at home. A Shelley slowly maturing in England might have given us poetry even more subtly beautiful than a Shelley suddenly ripened by

Italy. Byron might easily have been a better poet if he had not discovered the cheap and gaudy effects of the Levant. Browning might have stumbled on some English ring and book and produced a masterpiece that we might all have read instead of merely praising at a distance. And these are the poets, whose primary task is to reproduce for us the colour and bloom of their emotions. The novelists—and most of our voluntary exiles now are novelists—have still more cause to remain at home, where there is a kind of life they know ready for them to interpret.

But off they go, so many of them, to Paris, to the Riviera, to Italy, to Vienna, to Honolulu, and you can watch their work steadily declining. Rutherford's, I am certain, will go to pieces. All the English sap and savour will run out of it, leaving a dry husk of affectation. It is possible—though the thought appals—that he himself will gradually assume cosmopolitan airs. Is there any one more boring and futile than your cosmopolitan æsthete? He knows all the opera houses and entrées, has been at hand when all the movements were initiated, has had his little talk with M. Marcel Plume or Herr Siegfried Dichter and has perhaps even been mentioned in print, by one of these masters, as "an English of the most sensitive and cultured"; but he never achieves anything. He has never been tied down to a narrow and illiberal life in one place, but has been able to skim the cream of European ideas; nevertheless, you never meet him when, so to speak, he has the cream with him; he never appears to have an original thought in his head. He is of no import-

ance whatever in the scheme of things, being nothing better than a hanger-on, a tourist who has lost not only his native sense and humour but even his gaping wonder. Paris is now full of Americans who have burst their bonds, fled from the crippling influences of Virginia or Illinois to a place where they can express themselves in fullness and ease, but curiously enough, all the good writing comes from those poor stay-at-home creatures on the other side who have not had the wit or courage to escape, and from Paris comes nothing but pretentious claptrap.

But Paris—so dangerous for the American—would have been better for Runnerman than Vienna. His leaving this country at all was bad enough, but the choice of Vienna was the last straw. I seem to have known scores of people, these last five years, who have rushed away to Vienna, and, except for the musicians, no good has come of it. I have never been to Vienna myself, and my knowledge of the place is very limited, almost limited to the fact that it was once a city full of rich people and sexual practice and is now a city full of poor people and sexual theory. I have, however, a deep mistrust of its influence. For some mysterious reason it has become of late the Mecca of the solemnly pretentious and intellectually half-baked, such as the humourless young gentlemen with beards who, they tell us, "are researching in Comedy", the bare-legged and herbivorous followers of *Youth* movements, and the Freudians of every shape and size. Even honest men and brothers feel its influence—some baneful alchemy that constitutes its revenge

for all its sufferings—and return implacable bores. Italy would have had its dangers, for it has long been adept at manufacturing humourless bores out of the foreigners who settle there. (How admirably, if cruelly, these Italo-maniacs have been satirized by Mr. Aldous Huxley! But what of that gentleman himself? Is he unspotted?) But Runnerman has been to Italy, and though it spoilt his work for a season, the easy picturesque being too much for him as it is for most of us, he quickly recovered and came back to us without a new discovery among the Primitives in his pocket or any of that St. Francis or Renaissance patter. Vienna will attack him more insidiously, however, and he is not equipped for defence against its peculiar poison gases. Probably at this very moment the Runnerman we knew is slowly shredding away, and a strange and solemn and something-*issimus* *Runnermann* is coming into being. *Hence, horrible shadow!*

PARTIES

SHE told me how she regarded them. Her attitude was quite different from mine, in fact the very opposite. She dislikes the *idea* of a party but nearly always enjoys the actual affair. An invitation to one does not give her any pleasure; her imagination does not play over the coming evening (stealing what poor honey it might afterwards have proffered) but shrinks from the contemplation of it; the hour finds her coldly dutiful or ill at ease, wishing she had never accepted the invitation; but then the party itself, with its people, its bright lights and pretty gowns, its social bustle, sweeps away all these misgivings and she floats happily down the evening. This is an enviable attitude of mind and I told her so. I wish it was mine for a season, after which there might be a chance of my reaching a reasonable point of view. My own attitude is, I know, very foolish, but I suspect there are others who feel about parties as I do. I suspect this because, though I like to think I am different from other people, as time goes on I discover, with diminishing pleasure, that I am not. Otherwise, in this matter of jolly evenings in other people's houses, I have no evidence. I notice your flushed and happy faces, your cheery "Good night" when all is over, your habit of turning up smilingly whenever you are asked, and it is hard to believe that your thoughts are mine. Here and there, how-

ever, there may be a fellow sufferer, and to such a one these confessions are addressed.

You have only to reverse my friend's attitude to discover what mine is. I delight in the idea of a party but find no pleasure in the reality. The result is that I can neither keep away from parties nor enjoy them. If I summon up my courage and refuse an invitation, I always regret it when the evening arrives. If I thought that I was being missed (and somehow I always think I shall be, at the time I refuse the invitation), I should not know this regret, but when the hour has dawned and the distant doors have been flung open, I suspect that nobody will notice my absence, even though most of my friends should be there. I settle down to read at home, but the printed page fades out, and wistfully I see the distant company, the shifting flower-bed of gowns, the manly gleaming fronts, the nods and becks and smiles and happy faces. From what wit and beauty and gracious friendship have I exiled myself! I am—O dagger of a thought!—out of it. I begin to see myself as a lonely neglected man, and then, a little later, as a sad, stern, Carlylean fellow, contemptuous of the vapid throng, communing with the immortal masters in scholarly and ascetic seclusion. This is the best I can do to make the evening go and I do not enjoy myself. It is a poor business being this kind of man if there is no one present to see how sad and stern and lonely you are, if the vapid throng, instead of being on hand to remark how you despise it, is somewhere else enjoying itself.

Thus there is nothing for it but to accept such

invitations as come my way. But though I know very well, or should know very well, what there is in store for me, I not only decide to go but actually look forward to going. More often than not I am swept there by a little undercurrent of excitement. I feel, like the fool I am, that this night will be different. I pat my hair and tie and try over an epigram or two. I see myself surrounded—for am I not in the centre of it?—by a distinguished company. My heart warms to my hosts. And then—it is always the same—comes disillusion. I have not been in the place quarter of an hour before I am asking myself what on earth I am doing there, why in the name of the foul fiend I ever came. As the evening wears on, and I chatter and grin and smoke filthy cigarettes (with a score good pipes waiting for me at home), my spirits sink lower and lower and I finally quit the place in a profound fit of depression. The only times I ever regret that I am sober are on these occasions. As I journey home, it seems as if all the silver cords had been loosed, the golden bowls broken, and the mourners were about the streets. I am one with the Preacher. Small wonder that poor Thackeray, who spent his nights dining out, should have spent his days crying, “Vanity! Vanity!” By the time I have unlocked my front door, I feel like a Trappist; I could engage to turn a prayer-wheel in Tibet for a decade. By the time I have warmed my feet by the fire, before going up to bed, I have decided, once for all, that I must avoid these gatherings, that I was meant to be a sad, stern, lonely fellow. “Oh no”, they will say of me, “you will never find him at this

sort of thing. Never accepts an invitation. Only sees a few old friends. A strange fellow—no, not shy—but detached, you know.” The thought of their saying this cheers me a little, and I go to bed a different man, only to wake up the next morning the man I was before, ready to accept the first invitation that arrives, to race again round the daft circle of hope and disillusion.

What is it that makes these entertainments so depressing? It is not that I have been insulted, snubbed, or even ignored. It is not a subtle form of wounded vanity, such as a feeling that by some dreary disenchantment I have not contrived to be as important as I ought to have been. I know this feeling well, no one better, and can easily distinguish it from this other feeling of hollow disillusion. Indeed, this disillusion is only the more marked when the evening has been what we have the pathetic impudence to call a “success”, when I have made my best remarks without being merely stared at, when I have told my best stories without noticing a film spread itself over people’s eyes. At such times, even when the depression can be kept at bay during the party, I have but to gather my little laurels with my hat and coat, go out into the darkness, to find the night one huge ironical comment and all my garlands withered away. A twinkle or two from Sirius and Aldebaran, and the dashing epigrammatist dwindle into an insect. A million dead parties have rotted on the cold scarred face of the moon. I go home sick at heart.

One explanation I can put forward, though even

then only tentatively. It is possible that I am really something of a barbarian, that at heart I do not understand the usages of civilization, which demand that we shall be social creatures. Genuinely civilized persons would appear to delight most in what might be called a state of acquaintanceship. They very quickly turn acceptable strangers into acquaintances but deftly avoid all further advances into friendship. The polite give-and-take, the pleasant show of talk, that is observed between acquaintances is all that such people ask of human intercourse. Now parties involve this type of relation between persons, and to me, possibly because I am lost in barbarism, it happens to be a very unsatisfying one. It asks you to be strangers at heart while maintaining the appearance of being friends. It demands all the outer fuss of friendship without giving you any of the inner satisfaction. I like friends and I can submit to strangers, but I find the people who remain between the two, claiming the privileges of both but avoiding both their obligations, so many nodding and smiling purveyors of Dead Sea fruit. And parties, I repeat, are made up of such people. They are not simply strangers who are on the way to being friends; that would be something that even I could understand. But no, they are people who refuse to be strangers and also have no intention of becoming friends. All that they want is to be acquaintances, mere How-d'you-doers, who appear to find some satisfaction in for ever playing an elaborate game of make-believe. If you will pretend an interest in their concerns and opinions, they will pretend a like interest in yours—

until the clock strikes and it is time to go home. They demand that you should turn out the contents of your mind for them to sort over, looking at the strange heap with a meaningless grin. With strangers, who are to be regarded either blankly or with hostility, you can keep tightly within yourself, and all is well. With friends, you can expand and unbutton and tumble about, and all is better. With these acquaintances, you can do neither the one nor the other, but have all the fatiguing ceremonies of human relationships without any of their sustenance. A party provides us with a whole evening crammed with this idiotic acquaintanceship, in which we can neither keep snugly within ourselves nor yet establish real communication with others, and this is the reason why they are so depressing. Possibly there are other reasons but I doubt if I shall ever discover them, if only because after this week—I have promised to go out to-morrow night, and a promise is a promise—I do not intend to go to any more parties.

THE SACRED BAD TEMPER

AMONG the paragraphs of news in a morning paper, there was one that caught my eye immediately by reason of its admirable heading: *White Elephant for America. A Sacred Bad Temper.* After such a heading, the actual item of news was, of course, little better than an anti-climax. This is unfortunately a world in which things find it difficult, frequently impossible, to live up to their names. Everybody must have remarked how the titles of most stories and plays are far more fascinating than the stories and plays themselves. I am never unwilling to praise Mozart and Apuleius, for example, yet I can well remember my disappointment when I first saw *The Magic Flute* and read *The Golden Ass*, for in those days I did not know that it would be impossible for any opera and tale to satisfy the imagination of any one who had brooded over such glorious titles. There remain yet, somewhere at the back of my mind, a more exquisite magic flute and a glimmering golden ass of my own vague creation. Now, however, I know that I must not expect too much, and so was not disappointed this morning when I read on and merely discovered that the white elephant at the Zoo is to spend the winter in New York, to which so many white elephants find their way at last. Afterwards it is to go on tour, presumably round the women's clubs of the Middle West, alternating with some of our most successful

novelists, who will, I imagine, be none too pleased at the intrusion and will have to trumpet all the louder. (How delightful it would be if this white elephant were stolen and Mark Twain thus became a prophet, perhaps the founder of a new sect!) "Unfortunately", the report goes on to say, "it is rather bad-tempered, and Dr. Saw Po Min, because of its mystical value, does not allow it to be punished." Hence the sub-heading: *A Sacred Bad Temper.*

This excellent phrase has been popping up in my mind all day. I know nothing whatever about white elephants, at least the genuine zoological variety, but I do know something about sacred bad tempers. They are not so rare as white elephants, but fortunately they are not so common as they were. Time was when there was one in nearly every English house, but now, I imagine, they are not easy to find. Let us, for once, praise our own generation. Contemporary life is subjected to a ceaseless bombardment of adverse criticism; from the machine gun corps of epigrammatic novelists and dramatists at the front to the episcopal howitzers in the rear, the wits and the moralists and the prophets riddle our way of living through and through. We are, it appears, a poor set and our life a contemptible trifling. Our fathers were better men than we are, more dutiful, more industrious, more purposeful, working their way steadily forward to noble ends and not existing on scraps of pleasure, from hedonist hand to hedonist mouth. Let so much be admitted. We agree that we are triflers, not genuinely absorbed in anything, that religion, morality, politics, even art,

do not command our serious attention. But there are some things that are better not taken seriously, and one of them is a bad temper. If nothing is sacred to us, we have at least abolished the sacred bad temper. Very few of us now, at least in private life, pretend to be white elephants. We have begun to recognize bad temper for what it is, a piece of gross self-indulgence.

Here the contemporary world, in its private though not in its public life, scores a point. In this matter we are superior to our fathers. When most people I know look back on their childhood, they remember, with a curious mingling of comedy and tragedy in their backward glance, that sacred bad temper. A surprisingly large number of Victorian homes seem to have sheltered a white elephant, which came trumpeting out of its study or ran amok through the nursery, which roared and stamped and broke things and sent mamma in tears to her bedroom, the servants scampering down to the kitchen, and the children cowering into corners. Because he was recovering from a late night, was liverish, had had a bad day in the City, father was allowed to work himself into a frenzy, to stamp and shout to his heart's delight, and all the other persons in the house had to run out of sight or try to soothe him. Nobody pointed out that he was acting like a fool, that he had no right to indulge himself so grossly, that his business was either to see a doctor or to laugh at himself. Father never laughed at himself and, like the white elephant, was never punished in any way, perhaps because "of his mystical value", and perhaps

because of other values by no means mystical. Had he belonged to this later and so unhappily introspective generation, he would have had sufficient acquaintance with the antics of his mind to remark that he was merely indulging himself, that what he at first imagined to be a fine state of righteous indignation was merely a particularly unpleasant form of insobriety. He would have caught himself, as it were, working himself up, and would have stopped half-way, to take a walk or laugh it off. The poor angry gentleman would have learned not to take his moods at their face value.

This is one valuable lesson we have learned, and those who complain, not without justification, at all our psychology and psycho-analysis and introspective literature might sometimes remember the fact. It is these studies that have formed in us the belief, to which we owe our more amiable domestic habits and less chequered personal relations, that the surface play of our minds must not be taken too seriously, that we may not be the embodiments of truth, beauty and goodness suddenly swept away by righteous indignation, but merely hot and bothered people, suffering from a bad liver or injured vanity. This does not mean, of course, that we of this generation become oriental philosophers the moment we pass through our front doors. We shall always have displays of bad temper, and enjoy them too, but they will no longer be sacred bad tempers. The time will come, no doubt, when a man will be allowed to be very angry only on special occasions, just as some men allow themselves to get tipsy only

on their birthdays or at Christmas. Already, I think, the sacred bad temper may be said to be abolished from the private lives of all cultivated people. Unfortunately, we have not yet banished it from our public life, where indeed it seems to flourish, so that though there are fewer white elephants on the hearth, there are perhaps more of them than ever trumpeting on public questions. It seems as if we cannot entirely let go of our prerogative of the sacred bad temper, and having dismissed it as an absurd fetish at home, we cling to it all the more closely outside our private lives.

Thus it may be that there is still a certain amount of bad temper to be loosed, and now that we dare not act like maniacs towards our families and friends, we are compelled to use public questions as a kind of safety-valve. We indulge our sacred bad temper when we come to talk about the Government or the Opposition, the Workers, the Capitalists, the Communists, the Fascists, the French, the Russians, the Chinese. A raid by the income-tax officials, a bout of indigestion, a broken pipe or a hammered thumb, and we work off our fury by denouncing some set of people about whom we really know little or nothing. All that matters is to pronounce the name with hatred, bitterness or contempt, and to roar out that all these persons should be imprisoned or shot. The words "Bolshevist" and "Red" have been a godsend to many a harassed father of a family and have enabled him to avoid innumerable domestic disturbances. The word "Capitalist" has been the welcome signal to let off steam to countless men,

mostly young, when they have been furious because their vanity has been hurt. During the war, old ladies were able to remain placid and sweet-tempered because with every rheumatic ache they would say what they would like to do with distant Germans and would become terribly ferocious. They meant no harm and most of them would probably have wept at the sight of a German lad with a sore finger. They were not thinking about real people, about husbands and sons torn and pulped on the barbed-wire, but were merely exploding over a word. So it is with those who are for ever telling us to blow up the "capitalists" or to shoot the workers. They, too, are not thinking about real people, and do not mean that they want to blow up old Mr. Brown or to shoot Jim the porter at the local station. The trouble is, of course, that behind these names, which so many of us are using merely to exercise the remnant of our sacred bad temper, there are real people, and we have only to shout long enough and loud enough and pretend hatred and ferocity past some unseen point to find ourselves once more plunged into some ghastly tragi-comedy, in which two or three colossal white elephants will come crashing through the fabric of civilization. Now that we have abolished the sacred bad temper from the drawing-room and the nursery, it is high time we made a last effort to be reasonable and abolish it from the newspaper, the club, the committee, the meeting, the legislative chamber. If it is necessary that it should have play somewhere, then let us all turn critics of the arts. The arts have a weakness for white elephants.

THE INN OF THE SIX ANGLERS

THIS morning, for the first time in my life, I wished that I was an angler, a real angler, not one of those fellows (as the fat man said last night) "who'll fish for an hour and then want to go and pick blackberries". As we rode away from the inn and left the lake idly lapping behind, with all six anglers happy on its bosom, I told myself that I had missed my chance of happiness in old age by not fishing steadily through all my youth. Perhaps, however, it was really the inn that did it, the inn and the lake together. There is no resisting an inn that is small and quaint and good, a place that is shelter and fire and food and drink and a fantastic journey's end all in one. Nor is there anything in nature more enchanting than a lake. Rivers I have loved, and with them the restless sea, so magical and yet so melancholy, perhaps because it seems the symbol of our desires; but it is those lovely lapping sheets of water, neither seas nor rivers yet having the charm of both with something added, some touch of quiet, peace, soul's ease, that really possess my heart. You travel over leagues of hulking and stubborn land, then suddenly turn a corner and find a space where there is no earth but only a delicate mirroring of the sky and that faintest rise and fall of waters, the lap-lap-lap along the little curving shore. Where else can you find such exquisite beauty and tranquillity? May I end my days by a lake, one of earth's little windows, where blue

daylight and cloud and setting suns and stars go drifting by to the tiny tune of the water. There is no mention of a lake in Wordsworth's strangely magical lines:

The silence that is in the starry sky
The sleep that is among the lonely hills,

but I will wager that they were written by some lake-side, for there is in them the lake spirit, the quiet enchantment, the heart's ease.

It may, then, have been the inn and the lake that made me wistful of angling. All yesterday we were travelling north through Central Wales, a lovely country, filled with an antique simplicity and kindness, that few people seem to know. I had heard of this lake and was determined to go there and, if possible, spend the night by its side. It is the one virtue of a motor-car that it can gratify such whims. We rushed north, then, and saw the hills grow in majesty and the sky darken over our heads. Where we stopped for tea there was some talk of a landslide, a road washed away by a recent storm, along the way we wished to travel, but by this time we were determined to see our lake or perish. (It is this spirit alone that saves the soul of the motorist, who would otherwise be a mere beast.) We discovered some kind of road on the map and were very soon bumping along it. The next two or three hours were Homeric. I was at the wheel and, you may be sure, innumerable smoking-rooms will find me at that wheel again, will have to travel with me down that road. I have now a story that is a fit companion for that other story of mine, that account of how I once changed

down to low gear with a screwdriver, when everything began to break in the middle of a Buckinghamshire hill.

The road dwindled to a mere tattered length of tape threading itself through the hills. There were great holes everywhere, and at times the steering-wheel was nothing better than a rattling useless ring of metal. The hills piled themselves all round us, great screens of slaty rock threatened to overwhelm our trumpery shivering craft, and the narrow bitten track went twisting this way and that, offering steeper gradients every five minutes. And now the mere drizzle, which had accompanied us for the last hour or two, darkened into a torrential downpour, blotting out everything but the next few yards of road. I had to open the windscreen because it was impossible to see through it. Big drops would hit me in the eye, so that at times I saw nothing at all. The track got worse, the rain fell more heavily, the car rattled and roared and leaped and bumped, and we laughed and shouted to one another, being now in that state of curious and half-sickening exaltation which visits us when sudden death is apparently just round the corner. But as the nightmare track lengthened out and the rain still fell in sheets, completely drenching us, smashing through hood and cap and coat, we settled down to the grim business of getting anywhere at all. At last there came a long descent and a slackening of the rain. We swerved down through a misty fissure into a grey and ghostly place, where we heard, once the car had achieved its easy hum again, the faint noise of water. We were

in a hollow in the mountains, a hollow almost entirely filled with the dim grey sheen of water. Here then was the lake. Another ten minutes of twisting and turning and we were shaking ourselves, like dogs from a pool, in front of a low building that seemed nothing more than three brown cottages joined together. This was the inn.

There never was a better journey's end. A Pimlico boarding-house would have seemed paradesal after that shattering ride, but here was a place in a million. We seemed to have rattled and bumped our way clean through this modern world into another and more lovable age, where "they fleet the time carelessly". It was not long before we were snug and dry, sipping sherry in front of the fire. We caught vague glimpses of elderly men, anglers apparently, for the place was full of rods and baskets of trout. Then came dinner in a low lamplit room. There was no nonsense about little tables and simpering maids handing round snippets of food. We found ourselves at a long table with all the other guests, and all the other guests were six jovial old anglers, the oldest and most jovial at the head of the table. The dishes, vast tureens of soup and joints of mutton, were placed in front of these two, who cut and carved and cracked their jokes. The dinner was good, made up of clean, honest, abundant food, and the company was even better. I have not had such a strange and satisfying meal for years. It was just as if one had somehow contrived to merge the *Compleat Angler* and *Pickwick Papers*. Outside, mist gathered on the lake, so remote that it might have

been in the heart of another continent, and darkness fell on the hills. Inside, in the kindly and mellow lamplight, we sat snug, and ate and drank and listened, still half-dazed, still with the rain and wind in our ears, like people in a dream.

I saw it all in the clear light of morning, a morning of thinning mist and faint sunlight on the lake, when the mouth watered for the fried trout and bacon that the two oldest anglers handed round. It was only this morning. Yet, as I look back upon last night, it still seems like a dream. The journey, the place itself, the inn, the six old anglers—the whole experience is more like the memory of some happy chapter in a leisurely old-fashioned tale than a piece of reality. I can hardly believe that that valley and lake are on the map, that in some directory of hotels that inn may be found. It seems as if that remote place had slipped through some little crack in time, so that the years had rushed by without avail, leaving it brimmed with its old-fashioned spirit of leisure and courtesy and kindness. Its guests, the six old anglers, were not quite of this world. They were, or had been, I believe, schoolmasters, doctors, musicians, but one could only see them as anglers, living for ever at this inn, for ever strolling down to the boats in the morning and returning with their trout in the evening to carve the mutton and exchange their long and leisurely stories (like those that hold up our older novels for whole chapters) round that lamplit board. One of them, the one who mastered the joint, had been going there for at least forty years, and the others seemed to remember the

place twenty or thirty years ago. Not that they did not know other places too, for they exchanged reminiscences about them, remote little lochs in Scotland, unknown Irish rivers, wherever there were trout and salmon to be had. They always gave one another all the facts, precise directions for finding places, the names of all the inns and innkeepers and gillies, and talked on as if life lasted a thousand years, kindly years of sunlight and mist and lapping water and leaping fish and golden hours about the dinner-table. They showed me, in the jazz pattern of our years, this silver thread of peaceful and quiet days that old Isaac Walton knew so long ago; so that I too would be an angler at last, and find my way again to that inn, this time to be one of their confraternity, and then perhaps I too could quietly angle my way out of time altogether. Yet even now it is all so unreal that I have a feeling that I could not find that lake and that inn again, and I am sure that by the time I am old and grey they will have vanished for ever.

very interesting

HIGH, LOW, BROAD

WOULD it be possible, I am wondering, to introduce a new nursery rhyme into this country, something pleasing in itself and likely to be of benefit to the child in after life? It is short, simple, direct, but carries with it a great message. In its present form—and I may yet modify it here and there—it runs:

Lowbrow,
Highbrow,
Broadbrow's
My brow.

The rhyme should be sung or chanted with more than a hint of contempt in the first two lines, and then with mingled notes of decision and enthusiasm in the last two. Some people may want to cry out against this "brow" business altogether, as I did myself a year or two ago, but protest now is useless, for it will be many a long day before these brows leave us. The only thing we can do now is to see that the terms are used properly, that the pleasantest of them is appropriated for the use of our own party, and that the others, loaded with the worst possible meanings, are fastened upon people known to disagree with us. To this end I hasten to announce that my friends and I are Broadbrows, as the rhyme would seem to suggest, and that most other people are either Lowbrows or Highbrows, and as either are equally contemptible.

The Broadbrow, you must understand, is not

some one who stands somewhere between the other two, a High with a dash of Low or a Low speckled with High. The difference between Broadbrowism and the other two is one not merely of degree but of kind, as the change of dimension would suggest. Stand your Lowbrow on his head and immediately you have a Highbrow. Set your Highbrow on his feet and he turns into a Lowbrow. But in order to become a Broadbrow, nothing less than a change of heart is necessary: your Lowbrow or Highbrow must be born again. High and Low have really the same weaknesses, things that do not touch Broad, as Wordsworth prophetically declared in his sonnet:

From low to high doth dissolution climb
And sink from high to low. . . .

Broad, you observe, is left untouched, and that casual shout mentioned later in the sonnet, that shout which is disastrous to High and Low, has obviously no power to trouble him. If you should inquire why a casual shout should prove to be so disastrous, the answer is easy. It is because both High and Low are not people with real taste and capable of exercising independent judgment, but are the mere slaves of fashion, moving in herds to decry this and praise that. Left to themselves they do not really know what they like or dislike; they have to wait for the word to be passed along; a casual shout and all is changed.

Neither Highbrow nor Lowbrow comes to experience directly, looks at things simply and steadily and asks himself if they have any value: both of them are hag-ridden by convictions. Thus the Lowbrow

is convinced that he cannot enjoy what is called intellectual drama, and if by chance he found himself at the most engrossing play, he would swear that he had not been engrossed. The Highbrow is equally convinced that no musical comedy could ever amuse him for half an hour, and would contrive not to be amused even if he attended a show filled with the most enchanting high spirits. Low will have nothing but happy endings in his fiction, and High will have nothing but unhappy ones. One will have nothing but sugar in literature, the other nothing but salt. Both of them are sheeplike, with no minds and wills of their own, and may always be observed trailing about in herds. All the thorough Lows cannot be induced to read a foreign author, even in translation, because they believe that a foreigner is little better than an idiot. All the immaculate Highs agree that a foreign author is infinitely the superior of an English one of about the same standing, because they believe that their fellow-countrymen are little better than idiots. With both of them, if you have met one—as people say—you have met them all, and would have no difficulty in setting down their opinions of books, plays, music, pictures. All the Lows cry the same cry and worship the same feeble or blatant gods. All the Highs move in one well-drilled mass from one artistic fashion to the next, all making the same gestures of contempt and admiration. They are all equally and hopelessly uncritical.

That this should be said of Low, who has been so long the dupe of vulgar impresarios, clever cynical press agents, publishing houses that are like sausage

factories, will not surprise any one who is not himself a Lowbrow. But it may be objected that the judgment is far too severe upon High, and so it would be if the term "highbrow" merely meant, as at first it did mean, a person who takes an intelligent interest in the arts. But now its meaning has been considerably narrowed, and the name can only be given to that other variety of the human sheep. Just as Low, you might say, is the fat sheep with the cigar from the City or Surbiton, so High is the thin sheep with the spectacles and the squeak from Oxford or Bloomsbury. He is Low's cousin, the one who is not strong and is so superior and terribly educated. I know him well, him and all his works. (I will say nothing of the female, that Medusa whose very image might turn this pen to stone.) His voice is squeaky from proclaiming false enthusiasms; his eyes are dimmed with reading third-rate foreign authors; his stomach has been permanently soured by vile Chianti; and now only about half a pint of thin blood drearily crawls through his arteries. The small income he does not enjoy, eking out by what he manages to wring out of the editor of the *What's Its Name* for an occasional review, does not enable him to support anybody but himself,-but he just contrives to remove himself safely once a year from London to the Continent, from which he returns with his loud admiration for what a friend of mine calls "the latest foreign fraud". Anything like a balance of emotion and thought in literature infuriates him, so that he alternates between a worship of authors who are entirely without feeling and a

worship of authors who are emotional lunatics. Never is he discovered finding anything for himself, but always barking in full chorus. Just now he is fussing over the French writers of the eighteenth century, but has a side chapel for the Restoration dramatists. Some time ago it was the Russians accompanied by the Elizabethans. Next year it may be the Spasmodic School of the Mid-Victorian period, and *Aurora Leigh* and Kingsley's *Yeast*, and Bloomsbury alone knows what. A few years ago they sneered your head off if you mentioned the films, but now they visit the pictures in a solemn body and you cannot see the feet of Mr. Chaplin for their prostrate forms.

Who was it that first pointed out that touch of genius there is in the clowning of Mr. Chaplin? Or in that of Grock, another of their recent fashions? Why, who but the Broadbrows, the people who are for ever quarrelling with both High and Low, who snap their fingers at fashions, who only ask that a thing should have character and art, should be enthralling, and do not give a fig whether it is popular or unpopular, born in Blackburn or Baku, who do not denounce a piece of art because it belongs to a certain category but only ask that it shall be well done, shall have in it colour, grace, wit, pathos, humour or sublimity? If you can carry with you your sense of values, your appreciation of the human scene, your critical faculty, to Russian dramas, variety shows, football matches, epic poems, grand opera, race meetings, old churches, new town halls, musical comedies, picture galleries, boxing booths,

portfolios of etchings, bar parlours, film shows, symphony concerts, billiard matches, dance halls, detective stories, tragedies in blank verse, farces, and even studio teas and literary parties, and enjoy to the full what there is there worth enjoying, giving even the Devil his due, then you are a Broadbrow. In short, you are the salt of the earth, and, of course, one of us.

YOUTH IN DISGUISE

THE ending of Tchehov's masterpiece, *The Cherry Orchard*, seems to me, as apparently it does to many people, rather a mistake. The play should really end when you are left with the empty stage after all the people have driven away, and you watch shutter after shutter being closed from the outside, so that you feel you are actually inside the vacant darkening house, hearing the thud of the axe in the cherry orchard. There is no more to be said and done, and the final introduction of old Firs, who has been left behind, forgotten, is an unnecessary stroke. But there is one line spoken then so poignant, so strangely significant, that for its sake alone you are perhaps ready to forgive the author his blunder and the character, that poor old crazed ghost of humanity, its intrusion. "Life", says the old man as he totters through the vacant shuttered rooms, "Life has slipped by as though I hadn't lived." Is there such a moment waiting for all of us, not when we realize that we are on the point of death, that the last page has been turned and the unseen hand is curving to write Finis, but simply when there comes crashing down upon us the knowledge that we are old, that life has slipped by? Is there such a moment lying in wait for us, inevitably springing out at last, next year, ten years hence, or whenever it may be? The question is neither Socratic nor merely rhetorical: I really wish to know; for as yet no such

conviction has forced itself upon me. That may be because I am still comparatively young, yet I do not feel to be drawing any nearer to such thoughts the older I become, for as the years pass there seems more and more of life stirring about me. Nothing, I feel, has slipped by so far. I take hold of the new while still refusing to loosen my grasp upon the old.

So far as my own experience goes—and I stand here willing to be corrected by those of an ampler experience—we never really feel old, not even when we say we do. The company of the very young, who happen to be callow, unduly optimistic, cocksure, and so forth, may irritate us into declaring that we feel a thousand years old, but always in such instances, it will, I think, be discovered that what we really feel is a temporary advantage or disadvantage. We feel that we know more, have seen more, have passed through certain stages that are still enchanting the more youthful persons in our company; or we feel a temporary and accidental physical disadvantage, being shorter in the wind, less elastic, heavier and slower, but nevertheless are convinced that this is merely because we have not had much time to devote to exercise of late, and are less interested in violent exertion than we used to be; but all our former powers are there if we should really want to make use of them. I do not say that they actually are there, but only that we feel they are there. Putting it shortly, then, we can say that the situation seems to be this, that we never really feel older than other people but only different, to our advantage or disadvantage, in some particular;

whereas we always do feel definitely younger than other people. The smallest boy cannot make me feel an old man, but even a moderately elderly man can make me feel a mere boy.

Indeed, now that I come to think of it, I never really feel grown-up at all. Perhaps this is because childhood, catching our imagination when it is fresh and tender, never lets go of us. This was brought home to me the other night, when I had my friend the Poet staying with me. We had sat up very late, being engaged in one of those enormous rambling talks in which, as Stevenson so finely observed, "you can pass days in an enchanted country of the mind", and we suddenly found ourselves in the small hours and very hungry. So we both stole off to the pantry and stealthily plundered it. "Don't you still feel guilty?", the Poet whispered through a mouthful of meat pie, "even when it is your own pantry you are raiding?" And, of course, I did. Both of us had guilt written all over us. Yet it was my very own pantry, to do what I liked with, and there was nobody in the house with either the power or the inclination to say me nay. (Though even if there had been, I would not have been deterred. Only the other week-end, staying with some friends at a country house—a very hungry kind of place, not because my hosts were not bountiful but because the local air was sharpening—and finding myself still awake very late, I stole down and raided their pantry after a long and exciting search for it.) But the old habit of mind, the result of boyhood's marauding, occasional discovery and punishment,

still persisted under all my new trappings. Nor shall I be glad to see it go, if it ever does go.

So, too, many a time when I am in company, I find myself suddenly still in childhood and look about me, wondering, amazed. The talk will be tremendously adult, of politics and economics and legal reform and all manner of grand affairs, and suddenly one of the greybeards present will turn to me and say: "What's your opinion, Mr. Priestley?" or "Don't you agree with me, sir?" and for a second or so I will be astonished, flattered beyond belief, at being so addressed. "Great Heavens!" I cry to myself, "he thinks I'm grown-up. I'm taking them in." And then, of course, I am particularly solemn and pompous in my replies, ecstatic at the sight of their sober interest, amazed that the more facetious of my elders does not wink at the rest, or that the more severe do not order me to bed. To this day there are times when, as my host passes the cedar-wood box, there returns to me, even though only faintly, that thrill I had years ago when my father first handed me a cigar—a fine symbolic act this, celebrating my first article in print (I was only eighteen, and it was a London paper too, and paid me a guinea for it), and declaring my emancipation at one fragrant stroke. This is to be foolish, no doubt, but I wonder how many of the others who dip into the box enjoy their cigars as I do, who see so many pictures, humorous and tender, through the slow, sweet drift of the smoke? Who would condemn that boy who is almost bursting inside because he is sitting up with the adults, hearing Father and Old

Johnson settling the Balkans or putting Russia in its place; or that blushing awkward hobbledehoy who, at a kind word or a gesture, delightedly finds the title-deeds of man's estate placed in his hands; who would wave them back to limbo? Not I, for one. Let them live for ever.

Perhaps they do live for ever, merely donning white wigs and painting in wrinkles as the years pass. You may catch this everlasting child in yourself, as we have seen, and sometimes you can catch it in others, and particularly in those very near and dear to you. The sexes have an odd trick of being able to spy the child in one another. I remember that, some time ago, I was lunching in a restaurant with a friend of mine, a woman with humour and imagination, and we chanced to see four men who, having lunched, were making their way to the door, perhaps a little boisterously. They were, however, all elderly men, solid City fellows, grey and bearded. "Look at them!" my companion whispered, "aren't they just like little boys?" Perhaps I was able to see them for a moment through her eyes, her imagination capturing mine, but certainly they did look like little boys, the same attitudes, gestures, eyes, but like little boys who were playing an elaborate game of make-believe, and had even gone to the length of whitening their hair, wearing false whiskers, and putting cushions up their waistcoats. All the marks of age were clearly there, but somehow they did not seem quite real, only something temporarily imposed or assumed through which there shone the essential boyishness. What were they feeling, I wonder, in

their heart of hearts? Were there somewhere behind those ample suits of fine broadcloth, those whiskers and gold watches and bald pates and cheque books and wrinkles, four stout lads who had just finished plundering an apple orchard or were stealing upstairs from the moonlit pantry with a ruin of pastry behind them? The whole matter is, of course, of no importance, except that if we could settle it all to our satisfaction, if we could know why one state seems real and another unreal, perhaps we should come near to uncovering the heart of this, our mystery.

A FILM ACTOR

THE other day I saw the very worst film I have seen for years. It was impossible to believe that the people who produced it were serious, that they were not roaring with laughter as they tacked on one hackneyed melodramatic situation after another to their drivelling narrative. The players were as bad as the film—with one exception, the man who played the ruffianly castaway on the desert island. This actor is an old screen acquaintance of mine, and whenever a film has a particularly brutish character in it, a murderous tramp and the like, I expect to see this man and am disappointed if I do not. He is, however, a very busy person, and so I am rarely disappointed. He plays both in serious and comic films, wherever a ruffian is wanted. I have probably seen him more times than I have seen Charlie Chaplin or Harold Lloyd or Douglas Fairbanks, yet I do not know his name. If his name is mentioned, then I have always overlooked it. His appearance, however, is as familiar to me as that of anybody I know. I could shudderingly recognize him anywhere. (What a queer thrill he could give us if, being on holiday in this country, he suddenly climbed into our railway carriage and sat there glowering at us!) Everybody who has seen a few films must know the man I mean. He is only of medium height, but has an immense breadth of shoulder and a gigantic head. His face, with its low retreating forehead, glittering little eyes, huge

spreading barbaric nose and vast blubber of a mouth, is singularly repulsive. A genuine shudder, like a little breath of wind among leaves, runs through the audience when that face first appears, perhaps pushing itself, in a slow bestial fashion, out of some undergrowth.

What a curious destiny is his!—to be the world's brute, sent for whenever it is necessary that a sweet young girl should be foully assaulted and a gallant young hero should prove his mettle. In one sense, of course, he may be said to be fortunate, for being in such demand he must make an extremely comfortable living out of his face, that very face which would surely prevent his rising in any other capacity, for few people, I imagine, would readily employ such an unprepossessing person. He has been lucky in the fact that his face and the films have, as it were, arrived together, so that being outrageously ugly, he becomes an actor of some consequence. Of him, even more than of all the beautiful ladies and handsome young men of the films, it can be said that his face is his fortune. Moreover, unlike them, he has no need to worry because time is bringing wrinkles and a double chin; he can afford to neglect the mirror; he can snap his fingers at all dieting and massage. He goes his way without fear of growing less ugly. He can still be ruffian-in-chief when his present juvenile "leads" have dwindled into fathers and mothers, lawyers and chaperones. Time—as Mr. Yeats might have said to him—can but make his ugliness over again, because of that great brutishness of his. There can be few other persons so happily

situated, living on their appearance and yet not caring a rap what happens to it, whether they are becoming fatter or thinner. How odd it would be, though, if in this world where most of us grow steadily uglier the process were maliciously reversed for this one actor of ours, so that he discovered, to his dismay as an artist if to his gratification as a man, that he was suddenly growing good-looking! We can imagine him consulting his glass every morning, and remarking, with the most curiously mixed feelings, the lengthening forehead, the sharpened nose and the dwindling mouth. There are, however, no signs of this process being in operation. He remains, triumphantly, our ugliest man. }

That, of course, is to be somebody. His face and figure, which must send the producers in Hollywood into raptures, are known all over the world. Is he proud of the fact? Is he the complete actor, with temperament and book of press-cuttings, or is he some simple soul, thankful to earn the money but for the rest deeply ashamed of the business, resenting the part he always has to play? Let us admit, to begin with, that his looks may be no true guide to his character. Just as some of the apparently sensitive and noble young creatures with whom he plays are probably in reality heartless young cads, so too behind this bestial mask of his there may be a good simple soul, a man who would not hurt a fly. If he is at all sensitive, then he is not so very fortunate as would first appear. At any and every moment during the day his face is sending a shiver of repulsion through whole hosts of his fellow creatures. He has

lurched and scowled through the nightmares of innumerable screaming children. At the very sight of him, flickering there on the screen, the girls forget their chocolates and squeeze the hands that are holding theirs, and the young men tighten their jaws and smoke ferociously. The moment that he finally disappears from the scene, having been knocked on the head or hurled over a cliff, is the signal for a general sigh of relief and perhaps an outbreak of applause. To people all over the world he is the personification of brutality, assault, murder.

I have seen him act in more films than I could number, yet I do not ever remember seeing him perform a decent action. He looks a brute, and he has to play the brute with all the thoroughness demanded by his melodramatic Hollywood. But he is always, of course, the unsuccessful brute. Now, whatever he may be in private life, he cannot enjoy playing such a part. If he is something of a brute himself, delighting in a fight and the rough wooing of pretty girls, it cannot be any satisfaction to him to be perpetually defeated in the public gaze, to pretend to be knocked down by soft youngsters who dare not set a finger on him off the stage, to be foiled by silly women flourishing empty revolvers. He is obviously a very powerful man, and it must be a great strain to give up fight after fight for the sake of some trumpery melodramatic notion of virtue triumphant. I must confess that for my part I should like to see him run amok in at least one film. In the very bad film I saw him in, the other day, he could have had my full permission to kill and eat the silly

hero and heroine, a dreadfully sentimental pair, who were for ever talking about being married in the sight of God. To have seen them—and all the other characters in the picture—knocked on the head by our friend would have given me great pleasure, and would have made a novel and entertaining film out of what was merely stale nonsense. The element of surprise never seems to enter the Hollywood scheme of things, otherwise this actor might be allowed sometimes to succeed. Let us have a few films with villainy triumphant.

He might also—and more subtly—be allowed to be decent for once. If he is not really the brute he appears—and there is no reason why he should be, for faces, however monstrous, count for little—then how heartily sick he must be of playing these bestial parts! To act regularly, month after month, year after year, and never to be given a single decent action to perform, not a single gesture that is not brutish, to be compelled to stifle, during working hours, every kind impulse, to have to live down, in the world's eye, to one's unhappy features—this is not to be so very fortunate after all. How ironical—and how very characteristic of this life—it would be if this fellow were in reality a man of exemplary character, who found himself disgusted by the private life of the handsome noble-looking creatures, those idols of the public, whose part in the shadow show is to restrain his pretended villainy! Surely it is high time his employers rid themselves of the idea that virtue always wears a handsome face and that a grotesque mask is necessarily the mark of a ruffian.

No doubt the tastes of those hordes of young girls whose ninepences arrive at the pay-box twice a week must be consulted first, so that handsome young men will have to be heroes and heroes will have to be handsome young men. But I think the rest of the audience, who dislike monotony, should have their tastes consulted too on occasion, and a film with a handsome young scoundrel in it and a downright ugly hero might very well be provided for us. It would introduce a little variety into the picture theatre, and it would, I am sure, be a welcome change for our friend, the ugliest man, and other actors of his type. The sight of a film hero a great deal uglier even than I am would be most welcome to me, and there are others who would join me in applauding when he had to knock an Adonis or two on the head as part of his heroic routine. To those film magnates who chance to see this page, and find no difficulty in reading it, I commend the notion.

HAVING SOLD THE PIANO

THE piano has gone at last, sold—appropriately enough—for a mere song. Perhaps it is a song by the heart-breaking Wolf, whose accompaniments to the Morike and Eichendorff lieder, those lovely lost maidens of melody wandering through thickets of incidentals, that piano knows so well. The drawing-room looks empty, forlorn, robbed of that long shining case with its gleam of ivory at the end; and now they are carting it away through the streets, my lovely Broadwood. When I saw them take it out and the man counted a dirty heap of pound notes into my hand ("Pahnd-notes better, as between stryngers", he said, parading a bluff honesty with suspicious gusto), I almost felt a Judas. That was two hours ago and still I feel miserable. And yet, such is our drollery, it was mere convenience that drove me to sell the instrument. I was giving up the lease of my house and selling some odds and ends of furniture, and thought the piano might go too, as there is another and younger grand waiting for me when I set up house again. I ought to be glad now that the distasteful business is all over. For days past a river of valuers and buyers and gentry who do a little on commission and snappers-up of bargains, that noisome stream, has flowed through this house. Little scrubby-moustached men from Peckham have trotted round the place like fox-terriers and looked as if they wanted to "mike an offer" for the very

boots on my feet. Tall young men from Knightsbridge have shown my bookcases their black coats and striped trousers and have patted my chairs in a condescending or rather avuncular manner. I have watched them all come and go, alternately being pestered by the desire to obtain a fair price for my possessions and by the desire to make an end of it all.

No sooner do we take a step out of our customary routine than a strange world surges about us. We have something to sell, it may be the lease of a house, odd pieces of furniture, a piano (and I have had all these almost together), and immediately an underworld opens to our view, the deeps of London give up their curious monsters. Among these are the gentry who do a little on commission, who do not even rise to the dignity of dealers but act as go-betweens, scurrying through the city after a flying pound-note or two. There have been several of them here, all alike, shabbily smart in blue serge suits, hoarsely confidential, given to worrying a man into a corner and there talking at length, addressing him by name at the end of every other sentence. Their object being to buy as cheaply as possible, they try to talk you into a panic. I meet many pessimists these days, but none to compare with the pursuers of commission. After a time, however, their mournfulness gives place to what seems to be a genuine indignation at the state of things. Never have I met such passionate denouncers of workmen who go on strike for an extra few shillings on their wages. What's it coming to? Where's it going to end? And

then they ask you to mark their words, and produce the same ones time after time in order to give you every opportunity of marking them, and declare that it may mean complete ruin, that it's touch and go. As their fury mounts and their apocalyptic vision broadens and they hurl this and that body of workmen to destruction, they and their blue serge suits fade out and you see them sitting in the ruins of colossal businesses, groaning beneath a load of responsibilities, striving at all costs to save the commonweal. It gives you quite a shock when they break the spell, saying "But that's not business, Mr. Beazley" and then mentioning some small sum; when they appear once more as economic shadows of a shade, patiently pursuing that little commission through the jungle of London.

One or two of these persons tracked down my piano, sniffed round it for a few minutes, trying a chord or two, then carefully took me on one side and mentioned its defects in a hoarse whisper, just as if they were afraid it might overhear them. All the men who examined my piano either pointed out that it was an old instrument, full of faults and of a shape that no one wanted now, and then proceeded to offer me a price for it; or they played on it rather lovingly—older men, these, by the way—nodded over it and said it had a beautiful tone and that Broadwoods were a good old firm, but that nobody was buying pianos now and they could not offer me a decent price for mine. One of these who praised but would not buy, the oldest of them, I liked immensely, and had I been a little richer I

would have presented him with the instrument. He played more chords than any of the others, rich progressions they were too, making a not unfeeling composition—*The Tuner's Romance* would be a capital title for it—and expressed himself delighted with the tone. He said it was a fine instrument, sir, a fine instrument. But his shop was full, entirely full; he was not buying any more for some months; no pianos were being sold. I made some vague remark about young people setting up house always wanting pianos. "Why no, sir", he began, just like Dr. Johnson but with a very different air, melancholy, wistful. "They don't go in for pianos now. First thing they want is a car, must have a car. Then what with wireless and gramophones, they never miss a piano, these young people now, never miss it. Oh! things have changed, I'll tell you, sir." And he looked mournfully across at me, and I returned the look, and together we gazed upon a world packed with motor-cars and one vast nasal scream of loud speakers and gramophones, a world where gradually the dust thickened on the neglected ivory keys and cobwebs hid the wires that once made the night lovely with silvery sound. After that, barter would have been a vulgar anti-climax. We parted very gently, as men newly come from the graveside of Herr Klavier.

Well, I have sold it at last, and it has gone rumbling down the street, and there is the money I have received for it, and somewhere else, awaiting my pleasure, is another and better piano, and everything is as I planned it, all splendidly convenient.

But I cannot say I feel happy about it. I am not, I think, a very sentimental man. Photographs of absent friends do not stare at me from all my bedroom and study walls; no long-faded flowers are to be found pressed between the pages of my favourite books; my desk is not filled with old dance programmes with little pink pencils, those perfect symbols of a dead frivolity. No, I am not a hoarder of mementoes, of things to linger over in many a deepening dusk until the room glimmers with memories; and indeed I have always had a contempt for those who would lay up such treasures of facile sentiment, pennies in the savings-bank of emotion. But I cannot help feeling sorry about that piano. The greasy roll of pound-notes there means several complete editions or glorious long cheroots or a week or two's idling in the sun or birthday presents for all the family, and after all you cannot press a grand piano between the pages of a book or tuck it away with a piece of ribbon and an old theatre programme in a drawer. But still I feel sorry, sorry and a little mean, as if I had turned away a very old servant. And then I ask myself what could have been done, for after all you cannot pension off a piano. The nursery? Not space for it. As for letting it moulder in lumber-rooms, that would be the worst fate of all. No, as usual, I have done the right thing; and strange it is how dreary sometimes the right thing seems to be.

Very soon they will have finished pawing it over, will have altered this and improved that, and it will have blossomed out into a Bargain. I have not been

up into the drawing-room again, and to-night I shall keep away; its ghost, a long glimmering shape, may be waiting for me there. And other ghosts, other ghosts, clustering round it, as they sometimes do in my memory. A piano, in a house where there has been a love of music, is no common piece of furniture. Even if there are no ghosts, there will be that great vacant space, which will seem to me a period marking the end of one chapter. How proud we were when that piano first arrived and immediately gave an air to our shabby, almost empty little drawing-room! "Furnishes the room!" we told one another, looking at it this way and that, entering upon it suddenly or slowly opening the door to let it dawn upon us. How we loved its noble rich tone, excitedly playing it by turns the first few days, attacking Purcell and Bach and Scarlatti and Mozart with our ambitious right hands and our sketchy dubious lefts! And then our Sunday nights when after four courses table d'hôte and real Burgundy we gathered our friends round that piano, and E. would croon her lovely little Wolf lieder, and G. would soar into Brahms and the Russians, and Edward would roar out his Schubert, and Frank would listen smilingly and miss nothing and I would fumble through the accompaniments and put in a bass to the occasional choruses! And now one of them is thousands of miles away, another somehow I never see these days, and the other two I never shall see and their voices are silent for ever. Where so much has gone, a piano may well go too. I will count the money—and turn the page.

THE SCRAP SCREEN

THE other week, rummaging in a second-hand shop in a small country town, we came upon one of those old-fashioned screens that look like an immense scrapbook, having dozens and dozens of little coloured pictures pasted on them. It was one of the largest I had ever seen; five feet high, with four generous folds, rounded at the top and all strongly framed in wood; and we were told we could have it for a sum that would not buy a few seats at the latest musical comedy. It stands now in my bedroom, at no great distance from my pillow, so that it is the last thing I see at night, during that little space between closing my book and turning out the light, and it is the first thing I see in the morning, when its pictured surface comes through the thinning mists of sleep and dream just as the glittering Rhine and the dragon's lair used to come through the melting curtain of steam at Bayreuth. Thus bidding me Good-night and Good-morning, this screen seems already like an old friend, so that perhaps I do not see it now as a stranger would see it. No doubt such things are monuments of bad taste, survivals from an era when the flamboyant and the gimcrack commanded our drawing-rooms. The persons who created these screens, who snipped away at picture books and Christmas annuals and pasted and gummed until there was not an inch of honest wood to be seen, were doubtless a long way beyond the

æsthetic pale. When it was first made, when all the pictures were new and bright and the scenes and personages they depicted were contemporary and had no charm of things long faded or lost, this screen of mine must have been singularly hideous. Its pictures are all framed in festoons of flowers, of the kind we associate with crackers and cigar-boxes, and sixty or seventy years ago those festoons, flaunting it up and down and across an area of forty square feet, must have been a horror.

But Time, so merciless in his traffic with the beautiful and the sublime, has a trick of dealing gently with such little horrors. What was an offence to the more sensitive spectators of its own generation frequently becomes quaint and lovable by the mere passage of the years. It may well be—though only by an effort of the imagination can we realize it—that in those very picture-shops and bookstalls that I pass by with a shudder there are things that my great-grandchildren will hoard as treasures and brood over with a delighted tenderness. Is there not one of them, full of a lettered wistfulness and fine phrases, sitting down somewhere in futurity to write his charming essay: *On an Old Copy of Nash's Magazine?* Time has been more than kind to my screen. The varnish so liberally spread over its surface has now yellowed it, and the hideous patch-work of bright hard colour has vanished long ago. Seen through half-closed eyes or at a distance, its four folds seem all of one shade, a faintly mottled old gold. The festoons, the scenes, the figures, all are subdued by the mellowing varnish and har-

monized as if they were an autumnal landscape. No single coloured scrap catches the eye, which wanders smoothly from scene to scene, yellowing fold to fold. Yet the screen is not really faded, and most fortunately its true character is there, underneath. You can see the original bright colours, the scarlet uniforms, the pale blue crinolines, the metallic green lawns, beneath the rich October glaze, and as you stare at one little picture after another their hues return, they become clearer and brighter, just as certain incidents in our lives begin to shape themselves for us again after we have spent some time looking back through the haze of memory.

Thus this screen, so subdued and unified on the surface and yet with all its separate gaily-coloured events so definitely marked beneath that surface, might easily pass as an image of an old man's memory. Is there not a whole life, a whole world, captured in its absurd pasted scraps? True, it is no life, no world, known to you and me, and probably it cannot be accepted as an accurate reflection of a lost age, being born of the casual ransacking of picture books and annuals. Its mode is antiquated. Examined closely, these tiny pictures that our grandmothers delighted in become droll and, here and there perhaps, pathetic, simply because they begin to recede from us, their incidents, their figures, their very drawing and colouring, all belonging to a world that has vanished. Yet in those few moments, just before turning out my light or on waking in the morning, when my eyes fall dreamily on the screen, it appears to spread life out before me, decorating

it quaintly indeed and festooning its peepshow scenes, so many little chapters, with impossible flowers, yet suggesting to me an epitome of our records. Here may be found love and war, children at play, girls flirting, men riding horses, feasts and graves and mountains shining in the sun. When I am on the borders of sleep, it has strange meanings for me, meanings that are lost when I sit down before it, as I am doing now, in sober daylight. Yet even now it is at least charming.

Here is a grey-whiskered old gentleman, not unlike Wordsworth, reproving a shepherd boy in a smock frock. Above, is a very demure young lady in a crinoline who is feeding a bird. All the young ladies here—and there are a great many—are either fair and pensive or dark and saucy. The fair ones are all either feeding birds or looking at birds or holding birds in front of their mouths, and would seem to be altogether too sensitive and pure to have anything to do with the rest of humanity. Some of them, it is obvious, are going into a decline. Not so the dark girls, who have roguish curls and shapes and all manner of lost feminine attractions, and who peep out of the screen in the most irresistible fashion. Not a few of them have saucy little hats, much be-ribboned, perched on top of their heads and a little, a provocative little, to one side. My three favourites are, first, the one with the scarlet pork-pie cap and short scarlet coat trimmed with fur and a white muff, who is skating so gracefully; then the Italian one in yellow silk and with a red rose among her raven curls, who is glancing at a note that obviously hints

at an assignation; and last, but best of all, the gay little vivandière dressed in a white tunic with blue facings and a short red and blue skirt, with a tiny white apron that is coquetry itself. You should see her diminutive three-cornered hat, her pretty gaitered legs, and the smile on her face as she holds up a bottle and a glass so invitingly. There is not a corporal in her regiment who does not adore her, and every time my eyes fall upon her four inches of feminine grace and caprice I too turn corporal. If the three bearded young men in red jerseys, top boots, and white hats, who are drinking in a rather operatic manner outside the little restaurant on the quayside, could see my vivandière, what a nodding and smiling and sighing and raising of glasses there would be! But they are on another fold of the screen and—alas!—must always face the other way.

We must hurry past the whiskered huntsmen, the little girl making soup, the four jockeys, the jolly Tyrolean lifting his sweetheart over a rock, the old men in silk stockings playing cards, the Caliph sipping his sherbet, the anglers and Arabs and shepherd lads, the birds and dogs and kittens, the coaches and ships that will never arrive yet will never stop, the queer feathery woods and dingy deserts and lakes of copper sulphate, hurry past them all so that we may see the soldiers. There, next to the children's party, you see a battle in progress, but what battle it is we shall never know. There are dark rows of tiny men moving stiffly over a plain where there are countless bursting shells, none the less deadly because at this distance they look like pear-shaped

masses of cotton-wool. We do not know what it is all about, but perhaps some of those tiny men know what it is all about. On the next fold of the screen, another battle is just beginning. The general is there and his staff, and all have immense beards and flat caps, but the general, who is holding out his right arm as a signal for twenty thousand more men to move forward, has the largest beard and the flattest cap. The background is dark with massed troops. We can guess what these gallant fellows are fighting for; they are fighting for God and the right and justice and honour and flat caps as against caps of a different shape. At the next fold of the screen, we arrive at the end of a campaign, just in time to see the soldiers marching through some unknown city in a triumphant homecoming. In front, gentlemen are waving their tall hats and ladies are fluttering their handkerchiefs. The troops, all magnificently helmeted and bearded, march proudly on to the sound of six trombones, which are there, in all the glory of gamboge, in the very centre of the picture. They are marching past the emperor or the king or the president, and all his generals, who are sitting stiffly on their horses at the back and are contriving to look stern but noble although they are only half-an-inch high. The buildings behind are large and dignified and are apparently made of cheese. This is probably the city's proudest day and now it will last as long as the screen. Right and justice having prevailed, the six trombones, silent to our ears but deafening no doubt to the old man cutting bracken in the picture above, are now for ever raised in triumph.

OPEN HOUSE

THERE was a man having dinner near me who looked like some one I used to know, and I puzzled and puzzled until suddenly I remembered. Uncle George! I knew that it could not actually be Uncle George, who must be quite old now or may, indeed, be dead; but this man looked like the Uncle George I remembered from long ago, and the sight of him started all manner of queer things from the thickets of memory. He was not my own uncle, you must understand, but the uncle of my old schoolfellow, Harold Thorlaw, and the greatest man in the Thorlaw circle. He did not live in our own little provincial town—and now I come to think of it, I never knew where he did live—but at irregular intervals he used to descend upon us, perhaps during his travels, for I remember that his business took him about a good deal. In our provincial circle he was a grand cosmopolitan figure. To his nephew and me, then in our teens, and indeed to all the Thorlaws, Uncle George was the great world. London, Paris, and New York spoke to us through him. He it was who told us about music-halls and head waiters and card-sharpers and those lordly expresses, those ten-somethings that do it without a stop, that are the very soul of rich cosmopolitan life. You always knew when he had arrived at the Thorlaws', for you felt his presence even in the hall, and were not surprised when Harold, or his

sister, or his mother, came out to you and whispered, "Uncle George's here!" There he was, oracular in the large arm-chair near the piano, perhaps having his little joke, asking the girls a riddle, suggesting a song (he liked a light cosmopolitan sort of music, and would occasionally produce a copy of something that was going well at the Gaiety), or telling us a queer thing that had happened at his London hotel, amiably keeping up a pretence of being one of us but clearly as far removed from us—and he knew that we knew—as Haroun al Raschid himself.

It was with the Thorlaws themselves, however, rather than with Uncle George, that my memory began to play. They were the kind of people we seem to run across only in early life, perhaps because they only blossom in provincial towns and wither and change in the air of London. The shortest way of describing them is to say that they were hospitality, real warm hospitality, incarnate: they kept open house. They were worlds away from the kind of lavish entertainers you encounter in London, the lion-hunting ladies and the vulgar rich whose houses have really been turned into railway hotels. They loved nothing so much as being surrounded by relatives and friends, and the friends of their relatives, and the relatives of their friends. It was not that they had plenty of money; they were anything but rich, and Mrs. Thorlaw's worn little housekeeping purse must have been drained of its last sixpence many a time to provide such hospitality as they proffered. They never sat you down solemnly to dinner, and could not have done even if they had

wanted to, for there always seemed to be three times as many people there as the tiny dining-room could possibly have held. No, their great meals were tea, in which the oddest of odd cups and saucers came floating out on a tide of hot water; and a sketchy and peripatetic kind of late supper, when there was always an enormous bustle and you were so occupied getting out of people's way and handing things round that you never noticed if you were actually having anything to eat.

Yet there shone through that house so bright a spirit of generous hospitality that it seemed to snow meat and drink there and you took part in a perpetual feast. What may have been in cold fact a cup of lukewarm tea and half a sandwich seemed a solid hour's happy guzzling. A small glass of cheap port in that house was worth whole bottles of vintage wine anywhere else. So strong was the atmosphere of festivity that material facts, actual cakes and ale, were of little or no account. You called there—"popped in" was the phrase for it—on an ordinary Saturday or Sunday evening and, if you had not known what to expect, you would have supposed that it was Christmas Eve or Old Year's Night, or that a birthday or a wedding was being celebrated. There would be two or three people in the hall, a few others having a snack in the dining-room, probably a group of ladies chattering in the best bedroom, and the drawing-room would be full. I have never known any other room like that drawing-room, for it was certainly not very large and yet there seemed to be no limit to the number of visitors

it would hold. To say that it would be "full" does not mean that it would not hold any more people (it always did), but merely that it looked full—indeed, fuller than any room you had ever seen before. You would see a swarm of faces on three different levels, for some people would be standing up, others seated on chairs, and the rest would be on the floor. My friend Harold, whose idea of pleasure in music was limited to the notion of taking something very fast and loud and trying to play it faster and louder than any one else had ever played it, would be pounding away at the piano; and every one there would be very noisy, very hot and flushed, very happy.

The Thorlaws could create this atmosphere wherever they went. I remember now that they took a tiny cottage on the edge of the moors during the summer months of one year, and that I called there after a long walk on either a fine Saturday or Sunday afternoon. I could hear them shouting and laughing long before I got to the door. The tiny cottage was simply bursting with people, who were eating and drinking and passing plates and filling teapots and putting kettles on the fire and being sent for water or returning with more milk. Every one would be explaining to every one else how it happened that he or she had "popped in", and at the sight of each newcomer a tremendous shout would go up. (I have a vague idea, though my memory may be the dupe of my innate poetical desire to have everything perfect, that Uncle George was there.) The Thorlaws, I believe, could have

filled a plague-stricken hovel on a blasted heath with such a laughing crowd of visitors. It was not merely that they had a passion for gathering people round them—for many have that whose houses are visited once and then for ever shunned—but they radiated such a spirit of friendliness and good cheer that instantly they put all their visitors at their ease, made it impossible to be stiff, supercilious, or shy, and transformed every chance gathering into a kind of hilarious family reunion. With them, if you were asked to sing a song, you immediately stood up and sang it without any more ado. I myself have sung comic songs there by the hour, without shame, and may be remembered to this day by all manner of people in remote places as a budding Henry Lytton, as “Harold’s friend, you know, who used to sing the comic songs”. I was always being buttonholed in odd places by people who had seen me there, people whose very faces I had forgotten, let alone their names, who asked me if I had any more comic songs and were obviously prepared to roar with laughter at every remark I made.

I would give something to be able to call there again to-night, now that they have all returned so vividly to my remembrance. To see Mr. Thorlaw, a humorous and pugnacious little man with blazing blue eyes, moving round with the doubtful port, chaffing the girls and bullying their young men. To see his wife, one of those little thin, dark women who seem to be made of wire and catgut, smiling, tireless, who would go flicking in and out of the throng like a radiant shuttle; and all those flushed,

OPEN HOUSE

noisy, and happy people I would meet there, most of whose names I never knew, whose names and faces, one and all, I have now forgotten. Foolish, funny little people, nothing like the beautiful, the clever, the distinguished persons whose acquaintance I can boast to-day, but dimly consecrated in my memory by a happiness that something seems to have withered away, shining there in a queer kind of Golden Age, strangely compounded of provincial nobodies and cheap port and chaff and comic songs. I wonder if that house, like the hospitality that gave it so much light and warmth, has gone the way of so many things and is now given over to loneliness, to darkness and dust. Here, at least, for an hour in my memory, the lights have been turned up, the fires poked into a blaze, and the doors opened wide again, the place itself a guest in the open house of remembrance.

THE END

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